

Edith wharton's mrs. brympton: a commodity or a revolutionary?

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



In Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market," she argues that, in patriarchal societies, women are essentially reduced from human beings to commodities whose exchange is controlled by men. According to Irigaray, this exploitation of women is so ingrained in our culture that it is in fact what "establishes the operations of [patriarchal] society;" in other words, the current social order could not exist without it (Irigaray 807). Mrs. Brympton, one of the main characters in Edith Wharton's ghost story "The Lady Maid's Bell," simultaneously reinforces this argument while also in some ways challenging it.

Mrs. Brympton's name in itself signifies that she is somewhat of a commodity. The reader is never made aware of Mrs. Brympton's first name, nor her maiden name, thus she is known only by her husband's last name. This not-so-subtly suggests that she is, indeed, the property of Mr. Brympton. Additionally, Mrs. Railton, Mrs. Blinder, Mrs. Ansey are each only referred to in the same manner, thus it can be assumed that they, too, are the property of their husbands. Alice, Agnes, and Emma, the only female characters fortunate enough to be endowed with names of their own, are young and yet to be married (or dead, in the case of Emma), but even Alice is most commonly called Hartley, which immediately designates her as the property of her father.

Aside from her name, Mrs. Brympton's submissive behavior toward Mr. Brympton, her unpleasant, alcoholic, and ill-tempered husband, indicates that she is more of a possession than a partner to him. She always speaks to him in a "kind voice," despite his near-constant gruffness and rudeness

(Wharton 5). Alice immediately takes note of this, indignantly remarking that it makes her “ sick to think of what some ladies have to endure and hold their tongues about” (Wharton 5, emphasis added). The word “ have” reveals that women like Mrs. Brympton have no choice or power in their relationships with their husbands—they must tolerate whatever injustices are inflicted upon them because of their status as a piece of property rather than a person.

A final and perhaps less obvious piece of evidence supporting the argument that Mrs. Brympton's character functions more as an object belonging to Mr. Brympton than an autonomous individual is her relative immobility due to her illness. She is for the most part bedridden, aside from her occasional walks in the garden. This means that she is always on the land that belongs to Mr. Brympton, which insinuates that she is just as much his property as the land itself.

However, Mrs. Brympton possesses several qualities which inherently challenge the notion that she is merely a piece of property. Her ambiguous relationship with Mr. Ranford is a prime example; by choosing to associate with a man other than her husband, she is not only demonstrating her autonomy but possibly committing adultery against Mr. Brympton, an act which, in its disloyalty, is quite revolutionary. Similarly, her close relationships with Emma and Alice and displays a sense of female solidarity against male power and even saves her from at least one potentially negative situation with Mr. Brympton.

The fact that Mrs. Brympton is fully capable of taking full control of the estate during Mr. Brympton's frequent, extended absences shows that she can succeed in a position of authority rather than one of submission. Wharton makes sure to note that the household often falls into complete disarray upon Mr. Brympton's arrival, with the servants snapping at each other and Mr. Wace, the butler and resident "Bible-reader," using unusually "dreadful language" (Wharton 4). Thus, it seems that the household runs far more smoothly under Mrs. Brympton's watch than her husband's, rendering her not only equal but superior to him in this regard. While the servants are equally obedient to both Mr. and Mrs. Brympton, it is clear that they hold much more respect for the latter of the two, further contributing to her sense of authority.

Toward the conclusion of "Women on the Market," Irigaray states that the three social roles imposed upon women in patriarchal societies are that of the "mother, virgin, [and] prostitute" (Irigaray 808). Mrs. Brympton, however, falls into none of these categories, as she is no longer a mother due to the inexplicable deaths of both her children, no longer a virgin because of the stipulations of her marriage, and most certainly not a sex worker. In this way, Wharton has created a complex female character who, while still adhering to many of the traditional gender roles that depict her as an object instead of a person, represents a form of rebellion against these restrictive, demeaning, and patriarchal ideals.