The touch of a vanished hand

Edith Wharton’s fraught relationship with John Murray

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Murray went on to publish Crucial Instances, Wharton’s second collection of stories, in 1901, and her first full-length novel, The Valley of Decision, in 1902. By the time she had finished her next novel, however, the brief association was over, and Wharton took Sanctuary (1903) to Macmillan for its British publication. Nevertheless, there are about sixty letters between Wharton and John Murray extant at the NLS, comprising letters from Wharton and copies of Murray’s responses, in the firm’s voluminous “letter books”, in roughly equal number. These letters, thus far unknown in the world of Wharton studies, contain much to interest Wharton scholars and fans alike.

From the first mention of Wharton in Murray’s letters, it is clear that he genuinely admired her work; having read The Touchstone in Scribner’s Magazine, he contacted Bangs in March 1900 to ask about the possibility of bringing it out in the UK. Even this exchange, however, had its own share of unspoken misunderstanding, with Murray accusing Bangs of deliberately misinforming him as to the advertised price of the novella in the US; a “misleading” (according to Murray) cutting from Scribner’s "Spring Announcement" went back and forth between the pair, with the prices of various works being underlined by each of them. Nevertheless, Murray was plainly anxious to secure the British rights for this new work, and a deal was struck, despite the fact that the terms had originally been agreed to by Murray, "under a misapprehension". At almost exactly the same time, Murray was also in negotiations with the agent J. B. Pinker over the possible publication of the then anonymous An Englishwoman’s Love Letters (Laurence Housman’s racy bestselling novel charting the unfolding of an incestuous love affair), and the similarity between this and The Touchstone is striking, both works hinging on the posthumous publication of a woman’s love letters. One wonders if, even at this stage, Murray had in mind the sales-generating possibilities presented by the alignment of two such similar works; certainly, he selected the same printer, T. and A. Constable in Edinburgh, for both—and they ultimately sported very similar, unusual bindings, with extended flaps covering the open spine of

to choose one of these, or to suggest an alternative title. He explains that "time is of consequence", as the book "is now in type awaiting a new title", and therefore requests a response by telegram within three days. In fact, Murray’s letter did not reach Wharton until a month later, by which time, thanks to an error on the part of her Paris banker, it had travelled from London to Paris to New York and back to Europe, where, as she put it to Murray, it followed her on "an out of the way ramble through Italy", before ultimately reaching her in Milan on June 11. In the same letter Wharton explains that she left New York "unexpectedly"—this may have been to visit her mother, who became seriously ill around this time, in Paris.

Nevertheless, despite the time lag between Murray’s urgent request and her receipt of it, Wharton’s reaction was to suggest a third alternative title—first by telegram on June 11, and then by letter on June 12. The telegram, rather frayed, but preserved in the John Murray Archive, reads: "Letter just received regret delay prefer to name book the more excellent way have written Wharton". The next day, in her first letter to Murray, she explained further:

I have just telegraphed you that I should prefer to call the English edition of my book, "The More Excellent Way". This seems to indicate what is really the thesis of my story—that a wrong may be the door to farther wrongs, or an impasse will against them. The two titles you were kind enough to suggest seem to me, in this special application, to have the fault of laying too much stress on what is really a minor issue—the relation between the hero and the woman whose confidence he has betrayed.

Wharton’s suggested title, and brief rationale, offers an interesting insight into her view as to the real “thesis” of The Touchstone. Contemporary and subsequent readers alike have understood the work to be fundamentally about the late Margaret Aubyn, the author who is “betrayed” when her letters are published—and thus, by default, about the relationship between Aubyn and her betrayer, the “hero” of the tale. While "The More Excellent Way" echoes a number of Wharton’s other early stories with biblical titles (such as "That Good, May Come", 1894, and "A Cup of Cold Water", 1899), to recast The Touchstone, an altogether more complex text, as a moral fable, clear in its lesson, is a curious shift in emphasis by its author. While Murray’s two titles seem to have been inspired by a combination of Tennyson (from whose lyric “Break, Break, Break” the touch of a vanished hand is taken) and the contemporary vogue for mand- lin sentimentality (embodied by works such as “The Souvenir of a Dead Heart”, a theatrical reworking of A Tale of Two Cities which was then on the London stage), and were dismissed out of hand by Wharton, they do indicate that Murray had himself read The Touchstone with some care, even if his reading differed somewhat from Wharton’s own stated aims.

In the end, however, neither Wharton’s nor Murray’s suggested replacement titles were