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# Flowers, Champagne, and Amputation in “The Men Who Saved the World,” a War Story by Edith Wharton

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## Abstract

*This article examines a war story by Edith Wharton, entitled “The Men Who Saved the World.” Two corrected but undated typescripts of this incomplete and unpublished short story form part of the Edith Wharton Collection in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Dating no earlier than July 1918, this multifaceted narrative is constructed around American participation in the Great War and anticipates an Allied victory. It simultaneously mirrors some of the concerns of Wharton’s other known short stories written around the tail end of the conflict when, for example, it casts a satirical eye over the volunteer efforts of privileged women. Perhaps most remarkably, “The Men Who Saved the World” reads like an experimental attempt—ultimately abandoned by Wharton—at confronting the traumatic effects of warfare through its explicit references to amputation as medical care at the front.*

## Keywords

*Edith Wharton, archival work, war stories, satire, amputation*

In the past decade, news of fresh archival discoveries (for example, Chinery and Rattray) has frequently thrilled Wharton’s casual and critical readers. Such finds have included a number of previously unpublished short stories: the incomplete and undated “A Granted Prayer” and “La Famille,” found by Sarah Whitehead in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, and “La Duchessa in Preghiera,” previously known only in English, by Meredith Goldsmith in the Rubenstein Library at Duke University. Early in the centenary of the Great War, the Beinecke also yielded an unpublished

short story, “The Field of Honour,” about that cataclysmic event. Although again incomplete and undated, Alice Kelly has estimated that Wharton wrote the story around mid- to late 1918 or in 1919 (“Field” 16; “Introduction” 36). In this paper I discuss another unpublished, incomplete short story set during the Great War, entitled “The Men Who Saved the World,” that may have been written around the same time as “The Field of Honour.” In the summer of 2019, I worked with the Edith Wharton Collection in the Beinecke as part of a project on secrets and silences in her writing.<sup>1</sup> I focused on Wharton’s portrayals of women and their experiences but was also interested in her negotiation of silences as a female author more broadly and in perceptions of reticence in her war writing in particular. The title of one specific short story in the collection piqued my curiosity: “The Men Who Saved the World.” It sounded like a story “suggested by the war,” as Wharton proposed in a letter to Charles Scribner a year into the conflict (Lewis and Lewis 357), and it turned out to be exactly that. Here I offer some context for “The Men Who Saved the World” and then examine, in turn, its victorious notes, satire, and treatment of trauma.

### “The Men Who Saved the World”

“The Men Who Saved the World” is the tale of Milly Arden, a young American nurse on her way to the Vosges front (4). Milly is introduced as a house guest/temporary nurse in the château/“beautifully-run hospital” owned by Mr. and Mrs. Madge Upshall (2). She is perusing the château’s handsomely prepared dining room ahead of a dinner party that gestures toward a change in the direction of the war. Also, she is to sit next to Captain Sherman Wake.<sup>2</sup> The reader soon learns that the Fourth of July was “only a few weeks ago” and that the “feats” of Captain Wake of the “—th field artillery [. . .] at Château Thierry were already famous” (4). These details set the story in the summer of 1918, possibly after the German attack in Champagne on 15 July and the decisive Battle of Château-Thierry three days later (Mick 151).

Similar to “The Field of Honour,” the real-time action of “The Men Who Saved the World” is limited, although the backdrop is one of phenomenal upheaval and, as in that short story and other war writings, Wharton is interested in the behavior of women—often intersecting with class—during the war. Written predominantly from Milly’s perspective, part 1 of the story shows her casting a critical eye over Madge Upshall’s carefully crafted response to the war,

as well as her own, more genuine, reaction, and considering what she knows by reputation of Captain Wake. Part 2 sees Milly scrutinizing privileged society's easy return to a prewar way of life and anticipating the arrival of a small group of officers that has been invited "to fill in the chinks between the leading characters" (3). In contrast to the rest, these "half a dozen men, two British and four American" whom she imagines arriving practically straight from battlefield, are described as the "real people" in the group (6). Part 3, which represents the end of the nine-page typescript, focuses on Milly's encounter with, and favorable impression of, Captain Wake.

Two near identical copies of the typescript of "The Men Who Saved the World" are held by the Beinecke. Both have been corrected but in different styles. On one, crosses penciled into the left-hand margin mark typographic errors that are sometimes also corrected in-line. These errors generally are resolved in the other copy of the typescript; for example, "showy destivity" reads "showy festivity," and so forth (1). In addition, it has been subjected to the same kind of double reworking that Kelly observes on the typescript of the "The Field of Honour" ("Field" 16): Wharton employed pencil, as well as black ink, to annotate (presumably) Mlle. Jeanne Duprat's typed text. I work here primarily with the latter typescript, annotated in Wharton's hand, and have integrated her insertions and substitutions in my quotations ("The Men Who Saved the World," Beinecke Library, Yale University, box 17, folder 517).<sup>3</sup> In addition to the two copies of typescript, there is one holograph page (numbered 15) offering two short paragraphs, begun in black ink and completed in blue pencil. It is not evident whether or where they might have been inserted into the existing typescript. Milly considers Captain Wake's character more closely and fleetingly contemplates the possibility of a romantic alliance between them, suggesting that the two paragraphs may have belonged to a subsequent part of the story.

The historical setting of the story—that is, following both American entry to the war in April 1917 and action at Château-Thierry in July 1918—provides it with a clear *terminus post quem* and hints tantalizingly at a composition date that may be roughly contemporaneous with that of "The Field of Honour." In this regard, correspondence between Wharton and Sir Frederick Macmillan in the latter half of 1918 is worth noting. Having previously negotiated with Appleton that *The Marne* and "The Refugees" would be published as a single volume by Christmas 1918, she agreed on a similar arrangement with Macmillan in September 1918, but taking into account the work's immediate newsworthiness, Appleton chose to publish *The Marne* as a single text instead, bringing the publication date of the text in New York forward by several weeks. In a letter to

Sir Frederick, dated 1 November 1918, Wharton apologized for the unforeseen turn of events that would necessitate a similarly revised publication strategy by her London publisher and suggested an alternative arrangement: “As regards the publication of ‘The Refugees,’ I have two other short stories already written towards a future volume in which ‘The Refugees’ would be incorporated, say next spring” (Towheed 205). The “two other short stories” are not identified. Wharton might have meant “The Field of Honour” and “The Men Who Saved the World,” but neither story is finished, and there is at least one other complete short story dating to the same period, “Writing a War Story” (1919). Shafquat Towheed points out that Appleton’s instinct concerning the immediate relevance of *The Marne* proved to be spot-on; the book’s strong opening sales figures did not hold up into spring, mirroring decreasing public demand for fiction about the war following the Armistice (205n). Wharton herself mentioned in correspondence with Scribner, dated 12 September 1919, “the objection of the public to so called war stories” (Lewis and Lewis 425). “The Refugees” appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* on 18 January 1919 but would only be anthologized in the volume *Certain People* (1930). Thus, the three-story volume that Wharton had proposed to Macmillan in late 1918 never materialized. Also, while it accepted “The Refugees” for publication, the *Post* rejected Wharton’s “victory articles,” one of which was entitled “How Victory Came to Paris” (Kelly “Field” 17; Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton’s Writings* 91). Publication of “The Refugees” and “Writing a War Story” may well have hinged on their satirical tone (Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton’s Writings* 97). Indeed, one might speculate whether “The Men Who Saved the World” was judged too “victorious” in certain respects to pursue further.

### A Victorious Story

As I discuss later, “The Men Who Saved the World” includes a prominent satirical strand, but it also clearly anticipates the Allied forces’ triumph achieved, at least in part, as a result of the involvement of American soldiers. The title’s reference to saving the world—an allusion to the Allied effort—evokes contemporary conceptions of the broad threat, and actual global consequence, of the European conflict of 1914–18. It also emphasizes the role of armed combatants, presented in idealized form by Captain Wake “who had come to typify for her [Milly] the high crusading impulse of her country”—“the type of the grave and sensitive young American bound on the Holy Quest” (5; 8). Backing the Allies was viewed by many as a moral imperative, hinted at by the religious

language of the story's title as well as these descriptions, and participation in the war as a transformative opportunity. Wharton perceived the conflict as an "ennobling force" (Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton's Writings* 39), and the character of Captain Wake, previously "a slow lanky banker's clerk in a small Indiana town, suddenly developing into a zealous and accomplished officer" (5), encapsulates this view. His surname alludes explicitly to his roused state, but Wharton adds for good measure that her hero represents "the thoughtful type of citizen-soldier which the Great War has found out and developed" (5). It is also worth considering the handwritten paragraphs that accompany Wharton's typescripts:

They had gone on from that to other things: home politics, the training camps, the future of the civilised nations, the American soldier's view of the war. On all these questions he was solid & competent, if a little slow & laborious; and through all he said flowed the flame of an impassioned honesty, grave, determined, unselfish.

"He's fine – awfully fine; but if I'd been a man I shouldn't have fallen in love with Joan of Arc or Florence Nightingale[,"] she concluded[.]

Captain Wake may take time to articulate his thoughts on the war, but quick-witted Milly finds them—and the man himself—laudable. Her readiness to approve of Captain Wake reflects her youthful certainty, shared with *The Marne's* Troy Belknap, of America's duty to enter the war.

Milly's two years of "agony of dread lest her own country should not rise to the same height" as that which she had witnessed in France and England in 1914 is an echo of wider concerns—shared by Wharton—over American isolationism in the first years of the war (3). "The Men Who Saved the World" plays out once such calls for an end to this country's neutrality were no longer necessary and hints at an imminent victory for the Allied nations. Apart from the pointed reference to Captain Wake's achievements at Château-Thierry, Wharton informs her readers that "times were changed, thank heaven"; that the sound of gunfire on the wind signifies "the victorious advance, and [. . .] carried hope and exultation to patriotic hearts"; and that "glorious news [is] coming in every morning" (2). Indeed, America's soldiers have made their mark on the war, so that "now the whole world knew them!" (4). The strongest indication that a turning point in the conflict has been reached, however, is the Upshall dinner party itself and Wharton's satirical treatment of the occasion and of its hosts more generally.

## A Satirical Story

The central female character in “The Men Who Saved the World,” Milly Arden, is no Rose Belknap or Ivy Spang, representative of the “high-society volunteers who appeared to be enjoying themselves more than they were making any discernible contribution,” to quote Hazel Hutchison (41). While their war work in Parisian hospitals is largely performative—they dress with care, bring offerings of fruit and flowers, read to patients, pour them tea and generally distribute good cheer—Milly’s conception of the war seems more rounded and her contribution to it more substantive. Her brief biography is given as follows: in 1914, she and her parents had been “blissfully motoring through the Tyrol” (3). The family spent September and October in Paris, and then traveled to England before returning home. Milly “had lived through the days of high tension and tragic isolation of which no sensitive memory can ever lose the mark” in France, and across the English Channel “witnessed [. . .] the girding up of the whole race to the awful task that faced it,” cementing her support of the Allied cause (3). She does not return to Europe “to take a part in the business” until asked—feeling “there was work at home better proportioned to her capacity”—but prepares herself “for hospital work,” so that “when one day Madge Upshall cabled that American nurses were badly needed, she set out as soon as she could get her papers” (4). She works in the Upshall hospital until its activities wind down, then secures a new position with an American unit. Thus, Milly appears to be a trained nurse, and one with some sense of the attendant dangers of war. As the Upshall party impatiently awaits the arrival of the officers, her free indirect discourse informs readers that “[o]ut there, at that very hour, men were falling by thousands to make the world safe – for this!” (7). The “this!” to which she refers is Wharton’s primary satirical target.

Readers learn early in the story that the Upshall château used to be “the frequent scene of showy festivity” due to its nearness to “a famous race-course and to several fashionable hunts” (1). Milly recalls its dining room—and its long table looking “its grandest”—on such occasions, suggesting that the Ardens and Upshalls belong to the same privileged social sphere (1). She recognizes the pre-1914 arrangement of “orchids and violets garlanding the expanse of damask between fruit dishes and candelabra of gold plate, and the long disused electric wall-lights bringing out the tender bluish greens and peachy pinks of the famous Fragonard tapestries” (1). Such luxury had been set aside when one wing of the château became a hospital in 1915 and the owners “camped in a corner of the great building” (1–2). However, they still

managed to host “picnic dinners in the spacious tiled scullery next to the kitchen” (2). Milly notes that Madge “had valiantly modified her whole way of life since the month of August 1914” (2). It cannot be entirely coincidental that Wharton expressed her exasperation over the “silly idiot women who have turned their drawing-rooms into hospitals (at great expense)” and deprived French *ouvrières* of their work by manufacturing shirts for the wounded in a letter to Bernard Berenson, dated 22 August 1914 (Lewis and Lewis 334). She decries that the urgent need to do good, or to be seen doing good, created new difficulties for others. Indeed, Milly “suspected the Upshalls of having adopted their war-habits [. . .] from the same instinct of conformity that had made them such models of fashion before the war” (2). Her insights do her credit: good news about the war has prompted Madge to have “flowers and champagne – yes, and gilt-monogrammed menus! – at a dinner” (2). The narrator expands on Milly’s stunned observation, delivered in free indirect discourse, by declaring humorously that for scullery picnics “champagne was permitted only to cook the [Perigord] truffles in” (2), and recalling someone else remarking that, at these gatherings, “even the foie-gras and lobster were disguised as substitutes” (3). Milly’s perspective, twinned with that of Wharton’s narrator, exposes the extent to which Madge’s conduct during the war has been directed by a concern over appearances, and also the arbitrary line between what is acceptable and what is not. These ideas are reinforced by the hostess’s eagerness to accommodate some “spontaneous” dancing: “Why not? If it’s arranged so that it seems just to happen?” (5). Madge’s explanation that “it’s being done every where [. . .]. At Laure de Beaune’s and Lady Elkridge’s, and heaps of other Paris houses,” confirms the influence of conformity on her behavior (5).

Society’s unbecomingly hasty reprisal of its prewar ways, which include the display of pretty young women in “low-necked dresses” and “pearls (it had been decreed in Madge’s set that pearls were always appropriate),” as portrayed in “The Men Who Saved the World,” is amplified by the ongoing battle on its doorstep (6). “[F]lowers and delicacies” have come from Paris in a motor “ostensibly set apart [. . .] for the transporting of the wounded,” establishing that the wounded continues to require transport (1). And not only is gunfire still audible in the château’s park, it sometimes “even shook the tall windows of the house” (2). A cannonade causes Madge Upshall “to tweak back an orchid shaken out of place” on the dining table (5). Her casual response contrasts with Captain Wake’s sensitivity to the noise, despite his acquaintance with a combat soundscape: “‘You hear the guns pretty distinctly here,’ he broke off once to say. ‘They must make the windows rattle when everything’s quiet,



don't they?" (9). What becomes evident is that the Upshalls, whether through familiarity or sheer determination, have adjusted to life in a war zone to the point of overlooking its harsh realities and reprioritizing their own, comparatively trivial interests.

### A Traumatic Story

The trauma of the conflict, however, is hinted at by Milly's decision to stay in America in its early years, and also by her reaction to the end of neutrality that ventriloquizes an unexpectedly nuanced stance concerning the American soldier's participation in the war. When, finally, "[i]n awe and pride she watched the young men of her race go forth," she does so "gravely, reverently, fearfully, as one who had breathed the breath of the Furnace, who knew the price to be paid – and knew there was no way but this of paying it" (3). It was Theodore Roosevelt who remarked in a letter to Wharton that "war and death are preferable to certain kinds of peace and of life," drawing attention to the price that may be paid (23 June 1915, Beinecke Library, Yale University, box 30, folder 919). Both would go on to lose loved ones at the front.<sup>4</sup> Watching them again, this time "marching through beflagged Paris on the Fourth of July," Milly considers that these servicemen are "still untried, unproved" (4). Her uncertainty over their preparedness stands in for a concern that was widely shared at the time. Michael Neiberg writes that 1917 saw American forces lacking combat experience alongside training, equipment, and proficient commanders, a situation exacerbated by poor understanding of the nature of the war in which they were about to participate (112).

The young nurse, however, has some sense of what awaits them: she twice recalls an image of a doctor treating patients in the early months of the conflict on the dining table, now bedecked in "flowers and hot-house fruits and champagne" (2). It is on that same "glittering table" (3) where "on a sinister winter morning of 1914, a haggard army surgeon had amputated uninterruptedly from dawn to dusk – and begun again the next day" (2). The recollection is presented as "one of the legends of the place" and Milly is said to be shocked at the way in which the table has resumed its former, conventional function (2). Is it possible that she herself witnessed the doctor at work? Is this not what is meant with her knowing "the price to be paid"—and a reasonable explanation for her fear when her countrymen leave for Europe? Indeed, on the same day that she watches them leave, "there had come back to her with peculiar intensity the vision of the long dining-table in the château, with the haggard army surgeon amputating,

amputating” (4). Wharton’s use of the word “vision” invites a literal interpretation. Interestingly, despite the gritty realism of repetitive amputations over multiple days, the labors of the surgeon, twice described as “haggard,” sound like the work of a lifeless automaton, imbuing the scene with an uncanny quality. This sense is heightened by the incongruous setting of Milly’s memory—a dining room instead of an operating theater—and because it has been overlain with the tangible paraphernalia of a society dinner party. Wharton’s symbolism seems unmistakable: human beings are consumed by warfare. Intriguingly too, the dining *cum* makeshift operating table fuses Wharton’s social satire and commentary on war’s traumatic effects in a reminder of her wide-ranging thematic interests and her skill as a writer.

Commentators often remark on her tendency to omit graphic accounts of the effect of armed combat on the soldier’s body in her fictional and non-fictional war writing (see Olin-Ammentorp “Not Precisely War Stories” 156; Matthews 226–27; Gómez Reus and Lauber 207; Kelly, “Introduction” 21), a silence that might have been informed by official and/or self-censorship to advance the Allied cause (see Demm). An often-quoted contemporary review of *Fighting France* (1915) published in *Bookman* drew attention to her emphasis, not on “the horrors of conflict” or “the gun’s achievement,” but on the “man behind the gun and the spirit that moves him” (Tuttleton et al. 222–23), while a reviewer for the *New York Times* foregrounded the novelistic quality of the volume: “Mrs. Wharton’s war book, like her novels, is written in a style that makes one think of carved ivory” (Tuttleton et al. 221), suggesting a cool, fictionalized portrayal of a conflict described by one British trench soldier as “hell with the lid off” (Nicolson 21). “The Men Who Saved the World” reads like an experimental step away from smoothly carved ivory, toward direct engagement with the war’s traumatic effect on the human body. Joanna Bourke estimated that more than 41,000 British soldiers lost limbs during the war, noting that the Great War led to an unprecedented number of amputations as a result of the weaponry employed, of unsavory conditions in the trenches, and of the likelihood of wounds becoming infected (33–34). Casualty clearing stations offered urgent medical care. Leo Van Bergen explains that these facilities, known among soldiers as “slaughterhouses” and “butchers’ kitchens,” were “frequently overloaded, with the wounded lying on the ground or outside, not far from stacks of amputated arms and legs in a corner” (295). Recovering patients would remain at the casualty clearing station, while those requiring further medical treatment would be transferred to a base hospital. The official status of Wharton’s fictional château-turned-hospital is unknown, but its proximity to the front makes the provision of surgical intervention reasonable and allows

her to tackle a prominent feature of the “real business” of this war—the severing of limbs—in an incongruously domestic context (see Olin-Ammentorp, *Edith Wharton’s Writings* 34).

Whitman, so deeply admired by Wharton, evoked the personal, human impact of a severed limb in “The Wound-Dresser” (1865). His earliest experiences of the American Civil War—when an estimated 60,000 soldiers underwent amputation (Carroll 114)—included witnessing in 1862 “a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c., a full load for a one-horse cart” at Lacy House, Virginia, a mansion-turned-hospital (Whitman, “*Specimen Days*” 47). Yet his poem’s speaker tenderly “undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the / matter and blood” adhering to the “the stump of the arm, the amputated hand.” Lying back gracefully “on his pillow the soldier bends with curv’d neck and / side-falling head, / His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on / the bloody stump” (*Leaves of Grass* 388). Robert Leigh Davis suggests that the kind of dehumanization which confronted Whitman in Virginia persuaded him to pursue “an ethics of intimate attention” (42). In her acknowledgment of the physical and psychological trauma of amputation in “The Men Who Saved the World,” Wharton expresses something of the war’s industrial scale and the depersonalization of its fighting machine, but also hints subtly at its potential effect on the individuals who become “complicit” in these horrors: the lone surgeon engaged in his frightening task from morning to night or the helpless observer.<sup>5</sup>

Wharton uses Milly to voice her anxiety over the divide separating those who are closest to the reality of war from everyone else. The comportment of the Upshalls’ civilian guests lends the scene “an obsolete pre-war look” (6):

The great people, as they grouped themselves about the fire and under the soft lights, in the old easy drawing-room attitudes, how they seemed to the girl’s bewildered eyes like historic wax-works resuscitating a vanished world! As she watched them, falling so unconsciously into the old intonations and grimaces, she even wondered – so much did they seem part of a dead past – whether an archaeologist would not have tried to pick out anachronisms in their make-up? And what would they seem to those others (the only real people) who had been summoned by Madge to fill up the interstices between her ghosts? (6–7)

The château, a place of ghastly wartime “legends” and “visions” for Milly, now seems the site of an even deeper, archaeological past at odds with the “real people.” Wharton’s imagery betrays the fear that a generation of men may have

been sacrificing life and limb in order to save a long-gone world populated by ghosts, here embodied by the Upshalls, an “English Army general,” “the Préfet of the department, an American Senator, a celebrated French aviator,” and the selection of pretty women (2). The censorious nature of Milly’s free indirect discourse in this passage matters a great deal. It seems an acknowledgment of a loss of certainty on Wharton’s part—not concerning the legitimacy of resisting Prussian militarism, but perhaps of the virtue of those whose futures doing so has secured—on the eve of the Allies’ triumph. Hutchison notes in this regard Wharton’s understanding “of Germany’s actions as an outrage, not just against Belgium and France, but against America itself” (75). Yet her portrait of the world whose defense she had advocated for years, on the eve of victory, seems ambivalent at best. This impression gains strength from Upshall’s attempt at humor a few paragraphs down. He calls out “Ladies first, please!” before guffawing (Wharton’s word) presumptuously to the English general in attendance, “We don’t give arms in the army zone – do we, General? We only present them!” (7). Whilst women’s precedence entering the dining room signals shifting gendered behavior during the war, Upshall’s amusement contains a whiff of resentment. In a military context, the phrase “present arms” is a drill command instructing a soldier to hold his rifle with both hands vertically in front of his body with the muzzle turned upward. Upshall may be suggesting that, in war, the only valid role for a man is perceived to be that of combatant, but his words also play uncomfortably on Milly’s earlier recollections of amputations. An amputee in a military context is unlikely to stand ready to arms—it is possible that he has literally given his arm.

## Discussion

Despite its title, a young woman is the linchpin of “The Men Who Saved the World.” Milly Arden’s perceptive gaze governs the story. Her concerns that America may fail to enter the fray alongside the Allied forces dovetails with Wharton’s own anxieties in the early years of the war, and her relief when they do is tempered by a precocious, conceivably traumatic grasp of what her countrymen will have to face. Here too she echoes Wharton’s understanding based on firsthand experience, which included her well-documented deliveries of medical supplies to ambulances and hospitals along the Western Front (Price 44), where she encountered “the sick & nervously shattered” (Lewis and Lewis 349; also see Wharton, *Fighting France* 118–19). Milly’s admiration for Captain Wake and his companions reflects the magnitude of their contribution, but she

also notices his “failings”: an awkward shyness that causes “the blood to rise to his brown temples” when complimented, an unexpected willingness to engage with “the ladies all evening,” a preference for Mrs. Lorry Belmer’s “appearance of romping youth” (8). Finally, Milly’s censure of the Upshalls’ brand of engagement with the war, which, whilst pitch-perfect, never rings entirely true, does not blind her to her own shortcomings. Indeed, her readiness to question her own attitudes heightens the complexity of her characterization. In response to Madge’s seemingly outrageous suggestion that *not* dancing at the dinner party out of regard for the men “fighting terribly hard on our front” might be selfish (5), she scrutinizes her own behavior for signs of prejudice: “Was she disposed to judge her fellows more harshly instead of more indulgently than of old?” (6). Signs of prejudice are precisely what she discovers: “If that was the effect the war had had on her, it really seemed to Milly Arden as if Madge were right, and she had indeed been thinking only of herself” (6). In this respect, “The Men Who Saved the World” chimes with David Rennie’s identification of a “more reflective attitude” in Wharton’s post-Armistice short stories, in which he finds that “the merits of inflated rhetoric and civilian intervention are assessed in considerably more measured tones” (41).

Perhaps the most remarkable quality of “The Men Who Saved the World” is its attempt to confront the effect of warfare on the human body. Wharton’s apparent reticence on the subject in her war writing has generated stimulating critical responses, such as William Blazek’s questioning of exactly what she saw at the front and to what extent she was able to make sense of it. He suggests, for example, that her experience was privileged in the sense that it posed “little danger along relatively quiet sectors of the Western Front” in the early months of a protracted conflict (18). Kelly too sees Wharton’s access to the war zone as privileged, but in terms of it being exceptional rather than inadequate. She identifies and interprets a “deliberate literariness” in Wharton’s writing that betrays her anxiety over the war dead in particular (*Commemorative Modernism* 83). In this unfinished story, however, Wharton’s explicit attention to amputation as medical care foregrounds the loss of limbs as one of the most conspicuous and common wounds during the Great War. It seems that she contemplated breaking her silence—if only briefly—at precisely the moment when a postwar future beckoned. This might have been because there was no longer any need to obscure its bitter realities out of compliance with official silences, or to encourage support for the war. Or perhaps, sensitive to the physical and psychological impact of the American Civil War on earlier generations of soldiers, Wharton intended Milly’s eerie vision of the nameless surgeon as an appeal to collective memory surrounding previous

conflicts—to recall the potential for suffering long after the battle is done, and to galvanize public and private acts of support to those who have made “the world safe.”<sup>6</sup>

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## Notes

1. My visit to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in June 2019 was made possible by an Edith Wharton Society Award for Archival Research and by further financial support from The Open University. I am most grateful to both organizations.

2. Captain Sherman Wake’s surname echoes that of another redhead, William Tecumseh Sherman (1820–91), general in the Union Army during the American Civil War, and may also remind modern readers of the M4 Sherman tank (named after the same general) used by American forces during the Second World War. In naming her fictional character, Wharton evokes impressions of awakening in response to the war and of transformation into a particular real-world military precursor.

3. The unpublished archival items that I cite in this paper are part of the Edith Wharton Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. They have been digitized and are all available online via Archives at Yale.

4. Roosevelt’s son, Quentin, was one of the Great War’s many casualties. His plane was shot down over France on 14 July 1918.

5. Milly Arden returns to France as a frontline participant in the war, but Wharton often draws attention to the way in which she thoughtfully observes people and events, perhaps to contrast her heroine with Madge Upshall who is characterized as fast acting yet lacking in conviction. Apart from witnessing the surgeon at work, Milly sees the start of the war in Paris, then in England. She looks on as American soldiers leave for Europe, and again as they march down the Champs Élysées. At the château she takes careful note of Madge’s preparations for the party, watches the guests arrive and resume their old rhythms of behavior. She also immediately picks out Captain Wake—“the one with red hair and large hands, and a tunic hunched up irrepressibly between his thin shoulders” (7)—from his companions.

6. The long-term effect of a war wound suffered during the American Civil War features explicitly in Wharton’s novella, *The Spark* (1924): “She [Leila Delane] told me privately he [Hayley Delane] was often like that – flaring out all of a sudden like a madman. [. . .] She says she thinks it’s his old [head] wound” (*Old New York* 199). (Wharton also includes two lines from “The Wound-Dresser” to reveal the identity of Hayley’s “queer fellow in Washington” [215].) Specifically concerning amputations, *Life and Limb: Perspectives on the American Civil War*, edited by David Seed and colleagues, provides valuable insight into the experiences of Civil War amputees.

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