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Richard Ellmann’s biography touches on a minor episode that occurred toward the beginning of Wilde’s 1882 lecture tour of the United States. During Wilde’s stay in Washington D.C., where he spoke on “The English Renaissance”, the idea was ventilated that he might be invited to the salon held by Marian Hooper Adams (usually known as “Clover Adams”), with her husband Henry Adams; but she declined to have Wilde among her guests, “on the grounds that he was a ‘noodle’”, as Ellmann puts it (Ellmann 170). Further unedifying detail about the episode is provided by Michèle Mendelssohn, who reports some exchanges between Clover Adams and Henry James on the subject of Wilde, the former sniffing that “fools don’t amuse me” and the latter snarling that his fellow writer was a “tenth-rate cad” and an “unclean beast” (Mendelssohn 28). At any rate, the matter ended there and Wilde and the Adamses never crossed paths – except, I will argue, in the realm of letters. My claim is that Henry Adams’s novel Democracy (1880), whose protagonist Madeline Lightfoot Lee is partly based on Clover Adams, had a small but perceivable influence on Wilde’s comedy A Woman of No Importance (1893).

The Adamses were part of a para-aristocratic elite sometimes known as the “New England Brahmins”, and the salon to which Wilde failed to be invited was one of the foremost centers of “soft power” in American politics around 1877-85, a meeting place for both politicians and literati such as James. The case has been made that a considerable part of the behind-the-scenes history of American politics in those years was written there (McGinigal). Henry (1838–1918) sprung from an uninterrupted patrilinear bloodline of prominent politicians that included two presidents of the United States (John Adams and John Quincy Adams, his great-grandfather and grandfather respectively). His own inclinations were more in the direction of scholarship, and after a period spent in Europe as his father’s private secretary, he returned to the United States to work as a journalist and subsequently as an assistant professor of mediaeval history at Harvard. He married Clover, herself the scion of a prominent Boston family, in 1872. She founded her salon in 1877 and led it till 1885, when she took her own life. Henry went on to cut out for himself a significant place in the history of American letters, mainly by means of two works, The History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison (9 vols., 1889-91) and the autobiography The Education of Henry Adams (1918).

Henry Adams’s first novel was published anonymously in 1880 as Democracy: An American Novel by the American publisher Henry Holt, and went through nine editions very quickly. It was then published, again anonymously, in Britain in 1882 by Macmillan and Co. (a publisher that Wilde had already sounded and would continue to approach for his own work, though never successfully). Adams published another novel, Hester, in 1884, this time under the pseudonym Frances Snow Compton, but carried his secret identity as a novelist with him to the grave.

Democracy tracks the social negotiations of a rich young widow newly arrived from New York, Madeline Lightfoot Lee, as she cuts out a niche for herself and her nubile sister Sybil in Washington society. Much like Clover Adams, Madeline “soon became popular. Her parlor was a favorite haunt of certain men and women who had the art of finding her at home; an art which seemed not to be within the powers of everybody” (Adams 24). In the main plot strand, Madeline finds herself the object of the attentions of an unscrupulous high-flying politician, Silas P. Ratcliffe, who is maneuvering to replace the newly established President, while becoming increasingly invested in the project of marrying...
Madeline. Although she does not love him, nor he her, she realizes that marrying Ratcliffe would be an excellent opportunity for her to accede to a position of great influence, as Ratcliffe’s chance at seizing the presidency seems strong. When he does propose, accordingly, Madeline is on the point of accepting him; but a last-minute revelation about Ratcliffe’s past dealings, orchestrated by her sister and another, more principled politician, John Carrington (who falls in love with both sisters at different points), brings home to her the extent of Ratcliffe’s corruption and persuades Madeline to curb her yearning for power and refuse both him and politics altogether.

Although attempts have been made to classify it as satire, Democracy’s ideological ambiguity between faith in the democratic ideal and pessimism about its vulnerability to corruption perhaps make the handle of “problem novel” more appropriate. In any case, it is a cleverly written, though not overly engaging portrayal of its milieu and of the moral and political dilemmas involving its inhabitants. It resonated with the latter’s real-world counterparts, and the identity of the author was the subject of sustained speculation among the Adamses’ circle, both Henry and Clover being included in a longer list of suspects; the couple, on their part, amused themselves by muddling the matter with false half-confessions, misdirections and spurious revelations to their acquaintances. So, by the time of Wilde’s American tour (less than two years after publication), the book was a success, going through reprints, surrounded by gossip, and associated with the closest thing to an aristocracy the United States had to offer – something to which Wilde must have been sensitive, especially since a key aim of his lecture tour was, as both David Friedman and Michèle Mendelssohn have shown, to build up networks (Friedman; Mendelssohn). So, it is no stretch to suppose that Wilde was aware of the book, and may either have owned a copy and/or retained some passages of it in his (extraordinarily absorbent) memory when, between 1892 and ’93, he was writing his second comedy, A Woman of No Importance.

My case for influence rests on the similarity between two passages, one in Adams’s novel and the other in Wilde’s comedy. Early in the former, there is a salon scene in which Madeline’s sister Sybil converses with an Italian diplomat, Count Orsini, within Madeline’s (here called Mrs. Lee’s) earshot. Orsini asks Sybil: “Do you not find it very strange, this society in America?”, to which she replies jokingly that “there are no snakes in America” (Adams 28). Mrs. Lee, apparently rattled by her sister’s flippancy or the European aristocrat’s bemusement, interjects as follows:

Society in America? Indeed there is society in America, and very good society too; but it has a code of its own […] ‘Society’ in America means all the honest, kindly mannered, pleasant-voiced women, and all the good, brave, unassuming men, between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Each of these has a free pass in every city and village, ‘good for this generation only’ […] (28).

The earnestness of this tirade is out of character for Madeline; Sybil remarks to herself that “it was not often that her sister waved the stars and stripes so energetically” (29). The company show signs of awkwardness, but “Mrs. Lee was too much in earnest to be conscious of them, or, indeed, to care for anything but what she was saying. There was a moment’s pause when she came to the end of her speech, and then the thread of talk was quietly taken up again […]” (29). Despite the room’s cold reception, Trilling is right in remarking that “there is no touch of irony in the speech”, which gathers an added dignity because it “rings […] with the passionate naiveté of an old-fashioned school oration” – a positive ideal, he argues, for many cultivated Americans of Adams’s time, especially when it came to defining their country against its European counterparts (Trilling 524).

While passionate naiveté is uncharacteristic for Madeline Lightfoot Lee, it is a defining trait of Hester Worsley, the young, puritanical American heroine of A Woman of No Importance. Hester is the only major American character in Wilde’s comedies; in this play, her Americanness, good heart, and lack of sophistication are systematically connected. Her high-minded harangues against the corruption of English high society founder against the condescending jadedness of the aristocrats gathered in Hunstanton Chase. For one of her first lines, Hester borrows one of Mrs. Lee’s expressions, as well as her sentiments:
LADY HUNSTANTON: I hear you have such pleasant society in America. Quite like our own in places, my son wrote to me.

HESTER: There are cliques in America as elsewhere, Lady Hunstanton. But true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country.

LADY HUNSTANTON: What a sensible system, and I dare say quite pleasant too. I am afraid in England we have too many artificial social barriers. We don’t see as much as we should of the middle and lower classes.

HESTER: In America we have no lower classes.

LADY HUNSTANTON: Really? What a strange arrangement!

MRS ALLONBY: What is that dreadful girl talking about?

LADY STUTFIELD: She is painfully natural, is she not? (Wilde 51)

We can note some patterns typical of Wilde’s borrowings from other sources. Expressions – in this case Madeline’s speech – which in the originals are rather florid or long-winded are stripped to their essentials; thus, Madeline’s much longer speech becomes the succinct “true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men we have in our country.” The increased terseness of the dialogue allows the dramatic contrast between large-hearted American naivete and the cold, amoral sophistication of the Old Continent’s elites to come across more powerfully. Nonetheless, the scene does piggyback on its antecedent in Democracy for some of its effects, and (again, typically) Wilde never offered any acknowledgment for this. One might say, however, that while the basic structure of the dramatic situation – skeptical European asking about American society, American character’s naively patriotic speech implicitly putting down blood-based European hierarchies, cold reception – is retained, it is repurposed to produce a somewhat different effect: in this case, a wry commentary on how certain “national” virtues breed their own shortcomings. Madeline’s and Hester’s character arcs, too, are different: the former learns to give her moral compass its due, the latter to make hers more flexible. At any rate, it is doubtful to what extent Wilde was consciously aware of “borrowing” from Democracy; to my mind, this verbal echo smacks more of a recollected remote reading than of Wilde writing with Adams’s (then-anonymous) book open in front of him.

While this is the clearest connection, there are a few more possible points of contact between Adams’s novel and Wilde’s play. At one point in Democracy, while on a boat cruise, the flirty Miss Dare teases the Anglo-Irish visitor to Washington, Lord Dunbeg, by remarking on “the rules which made an offer of marriage necessary. According to her, Lord Dunbeg was in immediate peril; gentlemen, and especially foreigners, were expected, in all the States south of the Potomac, to offer themselves to at least one young lady in every city” (Adams 70–71). In A Woman of No Importance, in the same conversation discussed above, Hester has this uncharacteristic moment of wit: “The English aristocracy supply us with our curiosities, Lady Caroline. They are sent over to us every summer, regularly, in the steamers, and propose to us the day after they land” (Wilde 51). Wilde could have got this concept from any number of sources, but both its association with watercraft and the fact that it is in the same scene as the more direct echo of Democracy suggest it may have been an effect of the same influence. Then, this line by the play’s amoral dandy, Lord Illingworth, “Society is a necessary thing. No man has any real success in this world unless he has got women to back him, and women rule society. If you have not got women on your side you are quite over” (Wilde 76) may also have been inspired by Adams’s novel, as this is exactly the thinking of the similarly amoral Silas Radcliffe, who thinks of marriage to a salonnière as a key supplement to his quest for power. And when, again in A Woman of No Importance, the pompous M.P. Mr. Kelvil remarks that “[t]here is undoubtedly a great deal of corruption in American politics” (25), he expresses the main theme of Democracy – one which, incidentally, reemerges in an English setting in Wilde’s next comedy, An Ideal Husband (1894). Finally, one can note that Lord Illingworth provides an encore of one of Lord Henry’s jokes in
A Picture of Dorian Gray: “LADY HUNSTANTON: 'What are American dry goods?' LORD ILLINGWORTH: ‘American novels”’ (24) – which, if not necessarily referring to Democracy, is at least a possible description of it.

Notes

1. The lecture was given on 23 January 1882 (Cooper).
2. The word is apparently used in the sense described by the Oxford English Dictionary as “colloquial. A stupid or silly person; a fool, an idiot” (OED online).
3. The “noodle” quote (“I must keep out thieves and noodles or else take down my sign and go West”) comes from Clover Adams’s letter to another correspondent, in which she labels Wilde Henry James’s “friend”, though he was no such thing. Mendelssohn, plausibly enough, takes this as evidence that Clover Adams suspected that both men had homosexual tendencies.
4. The only writing of Wilde’s that Macmillan and Co. published was his translation from the French of Ivan Turgenev’s story “A Fire at Sea”. See Clayworth.
5. Adams’s authorship of the two novels was only revealed posthumously in 1921 by his publisher Henry Holt; Adams’s name was first put on the title page of Democracy for the 1925 edition.
6. The editor Ernest Samuels reports the common view that the book amounted to an expression of Adams’s dissatisfaction with what he called the “respectable nullity” of Ulysses Grant’s administration (1871–79) (Adams xii). According to McGunigal, anonymity served Adams “to satirize freely the Washingtonian societal and political environment he witnessed firsthand in his wife’s salon” (48). A balanced assessment of Adams’s writings and politics can be found in Lionel Trilling’s essay “Adams at Ease”, originally in his 1957 collection A Gathering of Fugitives (Trilling).
7. Mendelssohn does not mention the Adams connection here, while Friedman merely reports the biographical information given in Ellmann.
8. The play was probably begun in July or August 1892 and rehearsed around March or April ’93. It was performed later that year and published in book form by John Lane in 1894.
9. Wilde’s choice of name for her seems to have been dictated by a pursuit of associations with innocence. Small and Jackson write: “As well as ‘Mabel’, Wilde seems to have considered other names before lighting on Hester: a manuscript note on the facing verso of £93 in [one of the manuscripts for the play] reads ‘Ruth: some nice New England name – Mary’” (Wilde 12 n.).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Works cited


