Fashioning Anti-Semitism: Virginia’s Woolf’s “The Duchess and The Jeweller” and the readers of *Harper’s Bazaar*

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1 Virginia Woolf’s “The Duchess and the Jeweller,” published by Harper’s Bazaar in 1938, has since been criticized for being at best trite, or at worst blatantly racist. In this story, a repellant Jewish jeweller, ironically named Oliver Bacon, is fooled by a degenerate Duchess into purchasing fake pearls. Dean Baldwin argues that Woolf acquiesces to the conventions of “slick magazine fiction” by using “flat characters” aimed more at ridicule than understanding (62). However, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” should not be dismissed simply because it appeared in a magazine. Her success as a short story writer hinged upon negotiating the politics of periodical publishing. Instead, Woolf’s depiction of a transgressive cross-class and ethnic encounter in “The Duchess and the Jeweller” acknowledges the commercial context of Harper’s Bazaar and, simultaneously, indicts readers’ practices of consumption.

2 In her literary criticism, Woolf argues that a text’s meaning is incomplete until a reader interacts with it. Readers of Harper’s Bazaar, versed in both contemporary anti-Semitic stereotypes and the fashionable materialism modeled in the magazine, watch Bacon practice familiar habits of consumption before he foolishly accepts the aristocracy at face value. Through her choice of narrative perspective, Woolf encourages her readers to identify with the Jewish protagonist. By implication, Woolf threatens readers’ confidence in materialism as a path to social mobility and as a bulwark against association with others deemed socially inferior.

3 Using a representation of a repressed Jew, Woolf leads potentially anti-Semitic readers to recognize that commodities do not represent character or morality, and that consumers are ultimately corrupted by their misplaced belief in surface value. My reading of “The Duchess and the Jeweller” aligns with Kathryn Benzel and Ruth
Hoberman’s approach to close reading. They argue that one can neither focus entirely on form or content, but in terms of what that form and content produce, including interactions between readers and texts (13). Thus, one cannot stop at simply citing the anti-Semitism within “The Duchess and the Jeweller,” but must also consider how it operates in the text and to what end. By arguing that Woolf uses the anti-Semitic sentiment of her readers to invoke certain associations and responses, I am not attempting to argue that Woolf is somehow outside of or excused from responsibility for the stereotypes she utilizes. Ultimately, her depiction of Oliver Bacon is undeniably anti-Semitic, and Woolf’s production of an anti-Semitic portrayal of a Jew cannot be overlooked, excused, or ignored, whatever her intent.²

“The Duchess and the Jeweller’s” representation of a Jewish man was controversial from its inception. New York literary agent Jacques Chambrun initially accepted the synopsis of “The Duchess and the Jeweller” after receiving it in 1937, but later rejected it “on the grounds that it was ‘a psychological study of a Jew’ and thus, because of widespread racial prejudice in America, unacceptable to his (unnamed) client” (Woolf 1984: 107). Literary critics have consistently misread these initial objections to Woolf’s story. Julia Briggs argues that Chambrun’s comments are a reaction to the inappropriate portrayal of the Jewish character: “if Woolf herself failed to notice the prejudice reflected in ‘The Duchess and the Jeweller,' it was evident enough to the New York agent Jacques Chambrun who commissioned it, or else to his client” (182). Laura María Lojo Rodríguez similarly argues that “it was difficult for critics and audience alike to account for such a racist portrait of a Jew, which was so inconveniently at odds with the oeuvre of a writer happily married to a Jew for more than thirty years” (116).

But, in actuality, Chambrun does not object to the anti-Semitic tone, but rather to the fact that the jeweller is Jewish, given the “widespread racial prejudice in America” that indicates that the audience is anti-Semitic. In addition, a magazine editor doubted Woolf’s ability to successfully change the background of the character, lending credence to the idea that it is the jeweller’s identity, not his portrayal that is of immediate issue: “. . . I am sure Mrs. Woolf cannot make this a story for us. It is a psychological study of a Jew and as they have distinctive characteristics I don’t think she could make it a . . . Scotsman or an Irishman” (Lee 679).³ Clearly, the objection here relates to readers’ inability to accept a Jewish character, not Woolf’s prejudice. The misguided focus on Woolf’s personal anti-Semitism has prevented critics from adequately assessing not just the source of publishers’ initial critiques, but also the message of the story itself.

The magazine industry’s targeting of particular readerships inevitably affected its choice of content. Mary Ellen Zuckerman observes that “undesirable consumers included [...] blacks, the illiterate, and the poor [...]. The delineation by publishers (pushed by advertisers) of welcome and unwelcome readers cemented the middle-class, white nature of the [...] women’s journals,” which “embraced particular images and subjects and rejected others” (132). In the 1930s, Jews were overwhelmingly considered undesirable by this segment of the population. As Jewish refugees fled German-controlled territories in increasing numbers, public opinion polls demonstrated American anti-Jewish sentiment relating to immigration and apprehensions over wealth and power. In 1938, a poll blatantly confirmed the popularity of anti-Semitic stereotypes when the public identified greed, dishonesty, and aggressiveness as the three qualities Americans most objected to in Jews (Breitman and Kraut 88). This
prejudice was also evident in governmental policy: President Roosevelt’s anti-Jewish refugee stance was based on a broad popular consensus. Most Americans believed that admitting Jewish refugees did not serve the national interest, especially during the Depression (Feingold 250). Anti-Semitic stereotypes abounded in the politics and the public mind of the time.

In this light, Woolf’s revisions, which removed all direct references to Jewishness, are a different kind of compromise. Rather than toning down her apparent anti-Semitism, Woolf was removing the word, or explicit label, of Jew from the text, in order to concede to publishers’ demands that the Jew be erased. Leena Kore Schröder argues that, “much as the narrative tries to write out the Jew, it can’t avoid foregrounding the terms of Jewishness” (306). However, Woolf’s project of revision was never to “write out the Jew,” but to mask him. Thus, the Jew in “The Duchess and the Jeweller” is hidden in plain view. What is perhaps most radical about this controversial story is that Woolf then compels her readers to identify with the very figure they most abhor. Schröder points out that “the Duchess is the story’s real criminal” and that our sympathies remain with the victim of her con, the jeweller (310). Despite his objectionable characteristics, the narrative is told from the jeweller’s point-of-view. Readers are privy to his internal thoughts even as they absorb the descriptions of his stereotypically unattractive Jewish body.

Because the narration is focalized through Oliver’s thoughts, readers experience the story through his perceptions. In turn, the readers marry their own expectations and beliefs to the point-of-view presented in the text. Virginia Woolf argues in “How Should One Read a Book?” that “if you open your mind as widely as possible, then signs and hints of almost imperceptible fineness, from the twist and turn of the first sentences, will bring you into the presence of a human being unlike any other” (Woolf 1932: 282). In “The Duchess and the Jeweller,” readers are exposed to Oliver Bacon’s alternate perspective through their engagement with the text. Michel de Certeau explains how the reader’s entrance into the story demands a shift in one’s figurative location, which exposes one to different worlds: “[the reader] is transported into [the text] [...] . This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient” (xxi). If the reader enters “The Duchess and the Jeweller” through the window provided by the narrative perspective, they must figuratively move in with Oliver Bacon. Their personal identities then inevitably inflect their comprehension of this alternate point-of-view.

In order to understand how “The Duchess and the Jeweller” operates for readers, I first examine how the content regarding fashion in Harper’s Bazaar frames the story, before exploring how the societal tension surrounding refugees may have directed readers’ responses to Oliver Bacon. “The Duchess and the Jeweller” engages with both of these factors as readers are introduced to this Jewish parvenu. Woolf’s subsequent depiction of a morally dubious exchange with a Duchess undermines initial assumptions about social status and the role of commodities in remaking the self. Virginia Woolf ironically uses a parody to mount a critique of the unquestioning acceptance of surface value. In doing so, she encourages the consumers of Harper’s Bazaar to question their own practices of self-fashioning and consumption mirrored in a detested figure, and, implicitly, the impulse to rely on caricatures that falsely praise the aristocracy and vilify the Jewish “other.”
Consuming Jewishness

Even as they were savvy consumers of fashion, contemporary readers of Harper’s Bazaar were also familiar with anti-Semitic stereotypes. Despite Woolf’s revisions, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” retains Bacon’s Jewishness through anti-Semitic descriptive characteristics. Just as the readers will identify Bacon’s wealth based on his clothing and commodities, so too will they comprehend anti-Semitic stereotypes with which they are familiar due to the political controversy regarding Jewish refugees.

Harper’s Bazaar was initially published in November of 1867 as a weekly journal, claiming that its combination of fashions taken directly from Europe and “first-class” literary selections would be indispensable to readers who desired such cultivation (Trahey xii). In the 1930s, Harper’s Bazaar continued to offer “high” culture as well as “low,” including articles by writers and intellectuals as well as regular fashion and shopping advice (Luckhurst 80). The May 1938 issue of New York’s Harper’s Bazaar in which “The Duchess and the Jeweller” appeared begins with a section on New York and Paris fashions. It contains articles like “Paris Hats,” “Coin Dots and Lace,” and, most coincidentally, “Pearls of Little Price” (Harper’s Bazaar). Clearly, such articles create a consciousness of correct and incorrect shopping, of consumption as a skill as well as a practice.

The ability to recognize styles, brands, and fabric types is enhanced by such reading, which makes distinctions between products and encourages fashionable behavior. The title page of “The Duchess and the Jeweller” is embellished with an illustration of a loupe and individual pearls scattered across the text, rendering it almost indistinguishable from other jewelry ads that precede it. The later pages of the story are sandwiched between ads for perfume and makeup that occupy the outside columns of each page. As a text, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” is embedded within a larger framework of consumption.

Initially, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” offers to a readership of practiced consumers, gleaning their education from Harper’s Bazaar, a list of commodities that operate as explicit codes of value. In addition, anti-Semitic physical characteristics become another contentious system of signs. Bacon’s inescapable alien Jewishness is particularly important for the readers given his identity as an English Jew. As Hitler’s policies in German-controlled territories persecuted Jews, thousands attempted to flee to the United States, England, and other countries during the 1930s. In fact, in July 1938, only two months after the May publication of “The Duchess and the Jeweller,” thirty two countries convened at Evian, France, in an attempt to find a solution to the international “Jewish refugee problem” (Friedländer 248). No significant changes in immigration policies occurred, however. Though some newspapers, including the London Spectator, expressed outrage at the lack of aid offered, in general, fears of “foreign” Jewish refugees flooding into England and the United States in the 1930s were encouraged by the press.

Woolf herself in 1938 wrote of “innumerable refugees” (Sherman 217-218), even as she, the wife of a British Jew, acknowledged the looming threat of anti-Semitic policies implemented by a militant German regime (Walkowitz 127). In England, distinctions between domestic and “foreign” Jews were common practice due to fears of alien Jewish invasions. As a result, domestic Jews were concerned about being associated with refugees that were more visibly “unassimilable” and thus threatening to the status
of all Jews (Gilman The Jew's Body 1991: 136). The attempt to blend in was a critical issue for established Jews in England and the United States facing a rise in anti-Semitic sentiment due to these waves of Jewish refugees (Berman 78). Oliver Bacon’s attempts to “fashion” himself through commodities as a wealthy Englishman hoping to associate with the Prime Minister enacts cultural fears of Jews as a threat to the very definition of the nation.

Within this social context, Woolf readily plays upon the readers’ backgrounds and viewpoints. She sets up a conflict between common assumptions about fashion and Jewishness. Virginia Woolf argues that the reading process is always inevitably framed by such personal assumptions, beliefs, and reactions: “. . . we learn through feeling; we cannot suppress our own idiosyncrasy without impoverishing it. But as time goes on perhaps we can train our taste; perhaps we can make it submit to some control” (Woolf 1932: 293). Woolf’s acceptance of the reader’s personal experience as a necessary part of reading anticipates reader response schema theory, which asserts that background—education, upbringing, and life experiences—determines the prior knowledge that the reader brings to bear upon the text. Moreover, viewpoint—what a reader expects to learn from the text, what she believes about the author’s intentions—determines her disposition toward the text itself (Flynn and Schweikert xv). On the one hand, Woolf exploits the reader’s exposure to an apprehensive national climate that encourages negative stereotypes of Jews. But, Woolf also makes Bacon’s project of identity-making coincide with the viewpoints of these fashion magazine consumers, using material products to try to create themselves anew.

The Elephant in the Room

The introductory moment of “The Duchess and the Jeweller” quickly assembles a barrage of outward markers of Bacon’s privilege. Woolf commences with a detailed description of Oliver Bacon’s home and morning routine. His affluence is emphasized by his geographic location in his upper-floor apartment, looking “down upon the glossy roofs of fashionable cars packed in the narrow straits of Piccadilly. A more central position could not be imagined” (Woolf 1938: 248). On the surface, Bacon first appears to be a member of high society. The description of his flat is a litany of objects. Chairs covered in hide, sofas covered in tapestry, the curtains made of figured satin, the mahogany sideboard, and “the right brandies, whiskeys, and liqueurs” all illustrate the composition of his wealth and status (248). Luxurious materials indicate both economic and social success. They function, in this first moment, to introduce others to his elevated social position.

The list of products then extends to Bacon’s assessment of his personal appearance. His appraisal of his perfect trousers, boots, and spats, “cut from the best cloth by the best scissors in Savile Row” again indicate his power as a consumer who can buy the highest quality clothing from the most well-known tailoring district in London which fashion-conscious readers will inevitably recognize as well (248). This attention to dress illustrates how clothing operates as a system of signification for wealth and prestige. Psychologist Elizabeth Hurlock explained in a 1929 study of the motivation for fashion, One of the chief values of clothing is that it enables people to advertise themselves in a way that will win the attention and admiration of others. Many who lack any ability and could not hope to rise above the ‘average’ on their merits alone, find a satisfactory outlet for this desire for recognition through the medium of dress. (28)
It is not enough to own fine clothes; others must see one wearing them in order to benefit fully from their value. Accordingly, Bacon measures his success through the reaction to his conspicuous display: “But still Oliver felt it purring down his spine, the nudge, the murmur that meant, ‘Look at him—young Oliver, the young jeweller—there he goes.’ Young he was then. And he dressed better and better; and had, first a hansom cab; then a car; and first he went up to the dress circle, then down into the stalls” (Woolf 1938: 249). The murmurs that follow him through the streets of London are foremost in his mind, rather than prosperous business transactions. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen argue that the city reinforces the use of clothing as a social signifier, since it is “a jungle of display, a circus of facade. Signs and lights shouted for attention. Window displays cried ‘Look and see!’ It wasn’t just a ‘habitat,’ it was, by its form, a self-promoter” (141). Oliver, in this atmosphere of spectacle, fixates on the products he conspicuously consumes as he attempts to ground his urban social identity solely in these signs.

This moment, however, is short-lived as Bacon self-consciously acknowledges his unlikely accession to this position. The chasm between his past and his present illustrates how much of himself Bacon has abandoned in order to assimilate. Woolf undermines the authority of Bacon’s wealth and central social position by invoking his repressed Jewish identity: “But he dismantled himself often and became again a little boy in a dark alley” (Woolf 1938: 248). Hannah Arendt points out that the Jewish parvenu must surrender all previous connections and characteristics in order to climb out of obscurity. She argues that “insofar as the Jew seeks to become ‘indistinguishable’ from his gentile neighbors he has to behave as if he were indeed utterly alone; he has to part company, once and for all, with all who are like him” (85). In his attempt to blend into upper-class English society, Bacon has both dressed for the part and abandoned his childhood associations. But, even as Bacon reinvents himself through his purchasing power, he cannot obliterate his emotional ties to his past.

When Bacon considers his movement through London, he cannot help but recall his origins as a boy in a London slum, and he speaks to a picture of his mother of his accomplishments. His subsequent reminiscence shifts readers’ perceptions of Bacon. Oliver’s memories of “selling stolen dogs to fashionable women in Whitechapel!” not only link him to criminality, but also place his childhood home in a lower-class Jewish neighborhood (Woolf 1938: 248). Rather than being a clearly demarcated member of high society, Bacon is a shifting figure that has climbed geographically and socially. Even as Woolf allows Bacon to dismantle himself, she forces this dissection of his selfhood upon the reader, who cannot avoid the signs that dissolve his public persona.

Bacon’s Jewishness is then solidified by his physical description. Though he has proven himself by becoming “the richest jeweller in England,” his yearning for more from life is expressed in the quivering of his “nose, which was long and flexible, like an elephant’s trunk” (249). His outward appearance had previously been described with a focused attention on his dandified clothing, but now his physical description extends beyond the clothing itself. Oliver cannot mask his crooked nose; no expensive cloth can cover it. Matthew Jacobsen points to “a long European tradition of anti-Jewish imagery” in which the Jewish nose is a part of “a unique Jewish physicality or Jewish ‘blood’” (Jacobsen 239, 241). Bacon’s attempts to dress himself in expensive clothing can then be read as an elaborate attempt at masking his physical difference. Phyllis Lassner argues that Woolf focuses on physical characteristics—such as Bacon’s nose—in
a way that calls attention to the stereotype while denying its presence. She points out that “the sheer number of words Woolf must use to recast the Jewish nose implicates her synecdoche in a suspicious gesture that both elides his Jewish identity and disparages it” (132-133). However, because Bacon’s identity is foregrounded by a constant barrage of stereotypical characteristics, it is never elided, but is actually made more obvious than if he had simply been named a Jew.

Woolf’s portrayal of Bacon illustrates the tradition of marking Jewish identity that, according to Jacobsen, denoted “their essential unassimilability” (Jacobsen 242). In addition to his elephant-like nose, Bacon’s way of walking is compared to that of a camel. Stereotypes also focused on the “bandy legs” and “flat feet” which supposedly caused the different gait of the Jew. This particular idea emerged from associating Jews with cities, places synonymous with disease and decay that produced medical problems with feet (Gilman 48-52). Bacon exhibits this affected walk, swaying slightly “as the camel at the zoo sways from side to side [...]. So the great jeweller [...] swung down Picadilly, perfectly dressed, with his gloves, with his cane” (Woolf 1938: 249). Though he walks along the street where he lives in his dapper attire, Bacon’s movements betray a sense of foreignness. So, as Bacon continues to attempt to ascend into the upper classes, he must cope with these stereotypically recognizable markers of Semitic identity as obstacles to assimilation. Sander Gilman explains that, for those who attempted to fit in, masking bodily “Jewish” characteristics became of paramount importance: “It was precisely those Jews who were most assimilated, who were passing, who feared that their visibility as Jews could come to the fore” (Gilman “Are Jews White” 1991: 234). Bacon is clearly not passing, and his attempts to repress his Jewish past and appearance are unsuccessful, even in his own mind.

Bacon combats this inescapable Jewish past with thoughts of his current appearance of wealth. Even as the seconds tick by while he makes the Duchess wait to see him, Bacon again comforts himself with a recitation of the objects which signal his success: “With each tick the clock handed him—so it seemed—pâté de foie gras; a glass of champagne; another of fine brandy; a cigar costing one guinea” (Woolf 1938: 251). In doing so, Bacon regains control, eliminating thoughts of his origins and re-focusing on the Duchess who is about to see him. Once the Duchess enters the room, the interaction between the two characters illustrates how Bacon orients his identity in relation to the Duchess—both his opposite and his ideal.

### Exchanging Aristocracy

The entrance of the Duchess sets up a major contrast between the social positions of the two characters. The physical description of the Duchess as she enters Bacon’s office illustrates her overbearing public persona: “Then she loomed up, filling the door, filling the room with the aroma, the prestige, the arrogance, the pomp, the pride of all the Dukes and Duchesses swollen in one wave” (251). Her stature illustrates her aristocratic past. She drapes herself in bright colors as her overweight body is held in check by pink taffeta. The sense of volume that the Duchess creates is, according to Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, typical of the display of aristocratic clothing. Attire can be “a palpable and powerful expression of a social relationship. Among men and women of the nobility, cloth—in abundance—was an achievement of their prosperity” (85). The comparison of the Duchess to “a parasol with many flounce [...] a peacock with many
feathers” furthers the impression of the Duchess’ wealth (Woolf 1938: 251). Since peacock feathers were used to garnish the hats and provide other accents on rich women’s clothing, clearly the Duchess’ representation as a peacock only reaffirms her magnetic, monied persona. Her magnitude becomes a marker of aristocratic opulence.

So, unlike Bacon, the Duchess does not use commodities in order to create her social worth. Rather, her intrinsic value as an aristocrat attaches to the items with which she chooses to adorn herself. Because Bacon and the Duchess hail from different social classes, their use of fashion as a display of social status and prestige serve very different ends. The Duchess, as an aristocrat, is a trend-setter. Bacon, however, who has climbed socially out of a Jewish slum, uses fashion as a tool of emulation. This difference in the use of clothing is an example of Reginald Abbott’s concept of the “style” packaging of commodity culture: “Trade was actually cueing its customers to acceptable styles—styles based on aristocratic forms. The spectacle or ‘parade’ of commodity culture was increasingly being consistently manipulated and constructed from the top down” (Abbott 201-202). Thus, the Duchess, rather than trying to create her persona through commodities, embodies the identity others, including Bacon and the readers of Harper’s Bazaar, may try to create through fashion. However, any initial assumption that the Duchess is a model to be imitated is rendered questionable by her actions, which quickly begin to undermine the assumption of worth based solely on her aristocratic position.

The Duchess’ character-value is brought into question by the very tactics of display with which she asserts her status. Her appearance marks her as aristocratic but also draws attention to her physical body in an atmosphere of interaction and exchange. Once they shake hands, the connection between Oliver Bacon and the Duchess is established. In this moment, Bacon and the Duchess move beyond the external markers that have characterized them as representatives of separate social spheres into a moment of deep internal and personal identification, which creates a clearly sexual undercurrent through commercial exchange. They are here to engage in a transaction that has become ritual: “And as their hands touched the link was forged between them once more. They were friends, yet enemies; he was master, she was mistress; each cheated the other, each needed the other, each feared the other, each felt this and knew this every time they touched hands in the little back room” (Woolf 1938: 251). The chiasmic structure of “hands touched” which forges the link between them and “touched hands” which ends it moves the reader subtly from a passive structure to an active one. Though at first it may seem like a courtesy, an almost accidental brushing of disembodied hands, Woolf’s repetition immediately revises this interaction to emphasize not only Bacon and the Duchess’ active participation in this forged link, but also that it occurs “every time” they are in “the little back room.” In this moment, subtle implications of impropriety begin to surface. This connection seems to be morally questionable as the indications of miscegenation between Oliver Bacon, the Jew attempting to enter into high society, and the Duchess who represents it, arise through their deep knowledge of one another.

The Duchess’ social vulnerability is expressed through the highly sexualized language that accompanies the presentation of the pearls that are for sale. Parts of the Duchess’ private self also seem to be put on display for the jeweller: “The Duchess opened; her heart, her private heart gaped wide” (251). As Oliver sees figuratively into her, the pearls are birthed from a slit in her ferret-like purse and slide “down the slopes of the
vast mountain sides that fell between her knees into one narrow valley” (252). As the pearls lay exposed in the Duchess’ lap, Bacon then plucks a pearl from this valley between her legs with his finger and thumb, examining it for authenticity. His seizure of the pearl from the Duchess’ body enacts a transgression as his business allows him access into private parts of this woman’s world.

Although she is not technically a prostitute, the Duchess’ physical vulnerability underscores her socially precarious position. Bacon’s discretion safeguards the Duchess’ honor and the respectable veneer of her aristocratic family, even as this transaction allows him personal access to her body and her secrets. The Duchess begs indirectly for secrecy and aid as she attempts to hide her gambling debts from her husband (252). According to Sander Gilman, British culture regularly associated gambling with sexuality, and neither was appropriate for proper women (Gilman 1991: 106). The Duchess clearly is a habitual gambler and has gotten herself into a compromising financial position because of it, which, by common association, also endangers her sexually and morally. Ironically, she must bare her flaws to one who covets her place in society in order to maintain that position.

The Duchess claims that these are the last of the pearls from the Appleby cincture (Woolf 1938: 252). Like a belt or girdle, a cincture is used to keep women’s garments in place. This item’s double use as functional apparel and luxurious adornment illustrates the intimate value of the piece, which only heightens the sense of personal connection to this particular commodity. Presumably an heirloom, the pearls from this cincture symbolize the personal, bodily value of the Duchess and also the symbolic value of the closed circle of the aristocratic world that has been violated. But, as Bacon wonders whether these pearls are, in fact, real, or whether the Duchess has already sold all of them from the cincture, he questions the value of this crumbling aristocracy which is being sold off piece by piece (252).

Bacon’s doubt is not overcome by examining the pearls, as is his professional practice. Rather, he is persuaded to purchase the pearls without examination by the Duchess’s extension of an invitation to join her family tomorrow, along with the Prime Minister (252). When Bacon hesitates, she mentions her daughter Diana and begs for the restoration of her honor. His infatuation with Diana and the aristocratic world offered by the Duchess goads him to accept the pearls based not on their actual value, but on their symbolic value. The mention of Diana immediately shifts the threat of sexual miscegenation from mother to daughter. The Duchess avoids any further sexual transgressions of her own body while still using the sexual availability of an upper-class woman to entice Bacon. Leena Kore Schröder explains that “the fear of mixing [...] is thus at the heart of this Jewish/non-Jewish plot: a fear of the union of that which is culturally unassimilable, forever degenerating into ambiguity” (308). Bacon’s subsequent fantasies of being alone in the woods with Diana clearly enact decadent fantasies that reinforce fears of compromised sexual innocence and purity (Woolf 1938: 253). Woolf invokes stereotypes of miscegenation to reinforce the depravity of the Duchess’ offer. By offering Bacon the social opportunities he desires and allowing him access to the upper echelons of society, she puts her daughter’s sexual purity at risk.

Ironically, the aura of an authentic tradition which surrounds Diana and, by extension, the pearls which signify access to her, is destroyed after the Duchess leaves and Bacon discovers the pearls to be false. Bacon quickly confirms his suspicions that he has been duped: “This, then, was the truffle he had routed out of the earth! Rotten at the centre...
—rotten at the core!” (253) The animalistic imagery of Bacon’s piggish discovery and subsequent disenchantment reiterates his own debasement, even as he reveals the inherent flaws of the Duchess and her pearls. The pearls, along with the promises of a society to which he has longed to be a part, are false. The Duchess, who occupies the social center which he so desperately seeks to enter, is able to manipulate Bacon into sacrificing his wealth in exchange for social position—but, of course, that exchange is never actually completed.

Bacon faces the consequences of a man who has made a bad bargain because of his fantasies of social ascension through consumption. In the end, he returns to memories of his childhood, the past he has desperately tried to eradicate through the purchase of commodities:

‘Forgive me, oh my mother!’ he sighed, raising his hands as if he asked pardon of the old woman in the picture. And again he was a little boy in the alley where they sold dogs on Sunday. ’For,’ he murmured, laying the palms of his hands together, ’it is to be a long week-end.’ (253)

Bacon asks his absent mother, the icon of his Jewish past, for forgiveness after being fooled by such an attractive veneer. The promises of consumption are broken as he realizes that he cannot escape who he is. The ambiguity of his final comment, “it is to be a long week-end,” leaves the audience only with Bacon’s disappointment. However, according to Woolf’s theories of reading practices, the final epiphany must occur for the reader:

The first process, to receive impressions with the utmost understanding, is only half the process of reading; it must be completed, if we are to get the whole pleasure from a book, by another. We must pass judgment on these multitudinous impressions; we must make of these fleeting shapes one that is hard and lasting. (Woolf 1932: 290-291)

Woolf’s formal choices require the reader to create closure. According to theorist Austin Wright, short stories often do not offer the conventional closure that novels require, a refusal that he terms “final recalcitrance” (121). The jeweller’s ambiguous reaction to his own revelation is this kind of ending. Instead, the reader is left, through reflection, to create her own sense of meaning from events that have reversed simplistic value judgments regarding both materials and people.

Though Woolf acknowledges this independence, she also uses common cultural codes regarding both fashion and anti-Semitism in order to encourage readers to make certain conclusions. Although Woolf does not overtly challenge anti-Semitic prejudices, she uses focalized narration in order to prompt readers to see that the Jew is the victim, not the villain, of this exchange. Because she employs the point-of-view of a culturally peripheral figure, Woolf opens the door to both identification, and possibly sympathy, with a Jewish figure.

Ultimately, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” overtly critiques blind worship of the aristocracy and imitative practices of consumption. Readers are given the chance to make their own conclusions about “The Duchess and the Jeweller.” Because their own background inflects their understanding, they may not alter their preconceived prejudices. But, by forcing readers to reassess the Duchess, the story, by implication, allows readers the opportunity to also reevaluate their judgments of the Jewish “other.” By witnessing their own acts of consumption in a caricatured Jew, readers of Harper’s Bazaar may question the practices that lead to his downfall, while simultaneously shifting their assumptions about the value of aristocratic society and the alien nature
of the Jew. Woolf requires her characters—and her readers—to read more critically, to be more aware of the core masked by social cachet. In the end, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” paradoxically demonstrates that we are what we are, despite what we own.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. I have retained Woolf's spelling of jeweller in the text of this article.
2. This critical approach differs from Jean Moorcroft Wilson's analysis of Woolf's use of satire. She argues that Woolf deploys stereotypes as a formal technique, a kind of "shorthand" that is thus not deliberately anti-Semitic (10, 16).
3. Lee's account of Chambrun's cable to Woolf is almost identical to Woolf's account in her diary; Chambrun's cable clearly illustrates the anti-Semitism of the American market, as he requested she change the race of the jeweller because of "terrific racial prejudice in America" (679).
5. This name was a site of contestation in the original text. Woolf changed it in drafts from the Jewish-sounding Theorodoric and then Isidore Oliver to the final, more Gentile name of Oliver Bacon (Dick 309). Of course, the mention of bacon invokes associations with the traditional Jewish practice of abstaining from pork; thus, Oliver Bacon's name simultaneously renders him acceptably Gentile and connects him to ideas of unclean Jewishness. This kind of maneuver deliberately plays on common links so that Woolf never has to actually say that Bacon is a Jew. From the moment he is named, an undercurrent of equations begins to identify him as such.
6. Anna Snaith's analysis of Woolf's use of Whitechapel in her novel Flush illustrates the relationship between geographic location and issues of race and class in Woolf's work (620). According to Snaith, upper-class dog owners were often stalked, their dogs stolen and then ransomed. This kind of illegal activity was associated with Whitechapel, which was generally a Jewish borough. Woolf re-deploys this depiction of Whitechapel in "The Duchess and the Jeweller."
7. Tamar Garb notes that anti-Semites believed that Jewish cultural and psychic otherness persisted even when Jews had rid the body of signifiers of difference (23). So, Bacon's inability to resist memories of his past enacts another anti-Semitic stereotype.
8. Megan McCue argues that, in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway, there is a tendency to see objects as representing the people who own them (315). If, in "The Duchess and the Jeweller," the pearls represent the Duchess, by bartering them away to the jeweller, the Duchess is also bartering herself.

RÉSUMÉS

Depuis sa parution dans le Harper's Bazaar en 1938, "The Duchess and the Jeweller" a été dénoncée comme étant ouvertement raciste. Pourtant, si l'agent littéraire, Jacques Chambrun, a au départ rejeté "The Duchess and the Jeweller", c'est à cause de l'anti-sémite du lectorat américain. Woolf révisa la nouvelle et enleva toutes les allusions directes à la judéité d' Oliver Bacon qui, malgré tout, ressort encore dans la caricature. En fait, ce que la description d'une rencontre subversive de deux classes et deux groupes sociaux condamne, c'est la pratique de la
consommation des lecteurs.
Les lecteurs habitués, d'une part, aux stéréotypes anti-sémites et d'autre part, au consumérisme à la mode, voient Bacon mettre en œuvre les habitudes modelées par le Harper’s Bazaar avant d'accepter sottement l'aristocratie telle qu'elle se présente. Par l'intermédiaire de la voix narrative, Woolf amène le lecteur à s'identifier à Oliver Bacon. Ainsi peut-il s'interroger sur les pratiques qui mènent à sa perte, tout en remettant en cause ses propres présupposés sur la valeur de la société aristocratique et sur le Juif comme nécessairement étranger. Woolf exige de ses personnages—et de ses lecteurs—qu'ils lisent d'un oeil plus critique, qu'ils prennent conscience de ce que le masque social cache. Paradoxalement, “The Duchess and the Jeweller” montre que nous sommes ce que nous sommes, quoi que nous possédions.

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