By Their (New) Words Shall Ye Know Them: Edith Wharton, Marion Mainwaring, and The Buccaneers

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Key words: stylistic analysis, type-token ratio, vocabulary richness, Edith Wharton

Abstract

Reviewers are sharply divided about the success with which Marion Mainwaring "completed" Edith Wharton's unfinished novel The Buccaneers. To gauge the "seamlessness" of the fit between Wharton's portion of the novel and the chapters that Mainwaring added, the present study presents a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the ratio of new types (i.e., words that did not appear in previous chapters) to tokens. Analysis of Wharton's classic novels The House of Mirth, Ethan Frome, and The Age of Innocence indicates that the ratio of new types to tokens followed a standard progression in her work. Analysis of Wharton's twenty-nine chapters of The Buccaneers indicates that here, too, she was following the same course. However, analysis of the "completed" version of The Buccaneers reveals that the substitution of Mainwaring for Wharton as author caused a decisive break from the well established pattern.

Edith Wharton wrote numerous novels and novellas, of which three – The House of Mirth (1905), Ethan Frome (1911), and The Age of Innocence (1920) – are often considered classics of American literature. Left unfinished at Wharton's death in 1937 was her fourteenth novel, The Buccaneers. In the view of many critics, The Buccaneers might well have ranked among Wharton's greatest works had it been completed (Auchincloss, 1974, p. 327; Lewis, 1975, p. 523; Lewis and Lewis, 1988, pp. 511–12; McDowell, 1976, p. 42; Walton, 1970, p. 176). It was published in 1938 with the text broken off in the middle of the twenty-ninth chapter, where she had stopped writing, but with her original scenario for the book, which included her plan for the complete story line, appended. In this unfinished form the novel languished, attracting scant attention over the years from critics or the reading public.

There matters stood until 1993, when two new editions of The Buccaneers appeared. One was simply a reissue of the novel, bound with Fast and Loose, a romantic novel Wharton began when she was only 14. In all probability, the reissuance by a university press of these two obscure historical curiosities, notable primarily because they bracketed Wharton's career (Steiner, 1993, p. 7), would have passed largely unnoticed had it not been for the virtually simultaneous publication by a major commercial press of an expanded version of The Buccaneers in which Marion Mainwaring made some relatively minor changes to Wharton's text but also added twelve new chapters of her own to "complete" the story. Mainwaring's "completed" version of The Buccaneers was a major publishing event that worked hand-in-hand with the 1993 release of Martin Scorsese's motion picture version of The Age of Innocence to spark renewed interest in Wharton and her work.

The efforts of those who attempt to complete an unfinished work by an illustrious predecessor are invariably subjected to intense scrutiny and, consistent with the Japanese proverb that "The crow that mimics..."
The absence of a definitive benchmark of how Wharton herself would have handled the concluding chapters of *The Buccaneers* has hardly deterred reviewers from judging Mainwaring’s effort according to their assessment of its fidelity to Wharton. But in applying this standard, the reviewers quickly part company with one another. Some heap lavish praise on Mainwaring, whose work, in their view, provides a worthy finish to what Wharton so promisingly began. Thus Leon Edel (1993), an admirer of both the original and “completed” versions of *The Buccaneers*, likens Mainwaring to “a highly skilled restorer” who “has added gloss to the story’s original elegance and wit” and from whose hands “the novel emerges like a master’s painting.” Other reviewers are scandalized by the “completed” version of the novel. Thus Andrew Delbanco (1993, p. 34) considers Mainwaring’s effort “deeply disloyal” to the spirit of the book. Lambasting Mainwaring for engaging in an “exercise in literary necrophilia”, Delbanco detects a “painfully large” distance between her and Wharton: whereas Wharton characteristically described, with penetrating social and psychological insight and enormous self-restraint, the bitter-sweet coming together of socially unsanctioned lovers, Mainwaring, Delbanco (1993, p. 36) says, turns the concluding chapters of *The Buccaneers* into a “bodice-ripper” full of panting and crooning. Then again, Wendy Steiner (1993, p. 9) hails Mainwaring for engaging in a “commendably brave pastiche” that, if anything, improves on Wharton’s original. Speaking directly to the issue of the seamlessness of the “collaboration” between Wharton and Mainwaring, Steiner (1993, p. 7) terms Mainwaring’s portion “unobtrusive”. But John Updike (1993) considers Mainwaring’s effort a “bastardization” mismatched to Wharton’s conception of the novel.

By employing a simple statistical tool rather than engaging in traditional literary criticism, I attempt to provide a fresh perspective on the question of whether Mainwaring “completed” *The Buccaneers* as Wharton herself might have. To probe the fit between Wharton’s and Mainwaring’s portions of *The Buccaneers*, I rely on a venerable tool of statistical stylistics, the type-token ratio, but I adapt that tool in a way that is, insofar as I am aware, novel. Accordingly, the analysis that follows has a methodological as well as a substantive focus.