The American Dream of English Aristocracy, from Sentimental Fiction to Reality Television: Susan Warner's *Queechy* (1852) and the Women's Entertainment Network's *American Princess* (2005)

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The year 1850 promised a new era of friendship in Anglo-American relations. Early and mid-1840s America had been decidedly Anglophobic. Britain was accused of harbouring imperial ambitions in Mexico and Texas, lands coveted by the US, and there were ongoing arguments concerning the border with British Canada. However, Britain's interest in Texas never materialised into action, and the Canadian issue was solved by treaty in 1846, as were disagreements over the Isthmus of Panama in 1850. Britain was turning its attention away from North America and towards other parts of its empire, giving the US a relatively free hand to fulfil its Manifest Destiny of territorial expansion. These facts significantly eased American animosity towards England. So much so that the celebrations at Concord in April 1850 of the seventy-fifth anniversary of 'the shot heard round the world' included a conciliatory gesture: the Union Jack was flown at half-mast in memory of British soldiers who died in the Revolutionary War.[2]

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[2] William Brock, "The Image of England and American Nationalism," *Journal of American Studies* 5:1 (1971): 230. For more information on Anglo-American relations during the period under discussion, see: Frank Thistlethwaite, *The Anglo-American Connection in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), 1-38; Charles S. Campbell, *From Revolution to Rapprochement: The United States and Great Britain, 1783-1900* (New York: John Wiley and Sons Inc., 1974), 33-95; Philip S. Bagwell and G.E. Mingay, *Britain and America 1850-1939: A Study of Economic Change* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, reprint, 1987); Kinsley J. Brauer, "The United States and British Imperial Expansion, 1815-1860," *Diplomatic History* 12:1 (Winter 1988); David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship Between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1988), 14; David Englander, "Introduction" in David Englander, ed. *Britain and America: Studies in Comparative History 1760-1970*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), ix-xv; Howard Jones and Donald A. Rakestraw, *Prologue to Manifest Destiny: Anglo-American Relations in the 1840s* (Wilmington, Delaware: S.R. Books, 1997); Francis M. Carroll, *A Good and Wise Measure: The Search for the Canadian-American Boundary, 1783-1842* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001),

In 1850, America's best-selling novel was *The Wide, Wide World*, Susan Warner's phenomenally successful sentimental tale.[3] The story captures a transitional moment in Anglo-American relations. On one hand, when Warner sends her young heroine, Ellen Montgomery, from her humble home in rural America to Britain to live with aristocratic relatives, she uses the opportunity to reiterate the traditionally held American image of English aristocrats as authoritarian, decadent, and morally lazy. On the other hand, back in America, English and wider European culture is central to Ellen's spiritual and intellectual development, which is the novel's primary theme. Ellen eventually marries her mentor, an Englishman who has tutored her from English texts, and they settle down in a home crammed with artefacts he has collected during European travels. What is noteworthy is that the novel finds this integration of Old-World culture into republican society neither remarkable nor problematic. On British soil, it is true, Ellen strenuously asserts her American-ness in rejection of her relatives' attempted Anglicisation of her. In America, however, she can be educated through English texts, marry an Englishman, and look forward to a future in a home full of European art and English books, apparently without having compromised her stated desire to "'be an American'" (*The Wide, Wide World* 494). By the very absence of anxiety about this deployment of English culture, *The Wide, Wide World* registers a new, more relaxed tone in American feelings about the "parent" country.

This paper summarises one chapter of my PhD thesis, in which I examine American novels that feature American women who marry English aristocrats, and argue that up until the 1850s, such marriages are usually depicted as scandalous betrayals by the

243-306; Rebecca Berens Matzke, "Britain Gets Its Way: Power and Peace in Anglo-American Relations, 1838-1846," in *War in History* 8:1 (2001); Howard Temperley, *Britain and America Since Independence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 33-58.

[3] Jane Tompkins in Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), with an Afterword by Jane Tompkins (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1987), 584.

women of republicanism.[4] In *Queechy*, Susan Warner's next novel, published in 1852, something different happens, as I want now to explain.[5]

Like Ellen Montgomery in *The Wide, Wide World*, Fleda Ringgan, the heroine of *Queechy*, is forced while still a girl to work for a living when her genteel family suffers financial failure. In both novels, the male head of the family has struck disastrous business deals. Not coincidentally, Warner's own father lost the family's wealth in the national economic Panic of 1837 and, even after Warner achieved literary success, the profits of her publishing "went to pay for Mr. Warner's lawsuits, debts, and bad investments" and a somewhat embittered Susan resigned herself to "a lifetime of hard labor and looking after [her] father."[6] In *Queechy*, Fleda's eventual marriage to an English aristocrat enables her to reverse the downward social mobility she has endured, and to enter a social system in which wealth and status are secure, guaranteed by centuries of tradition and by English laws of inheritance and entail. Guy Carleton, who at the end of the story becomes Fleda's husband, twice during the novel uses his inherited wealth to save Fleda's family from utter financial ruin. *Queechy* presents a Cinderella-esque fantasy in which the English aristocracy rescues the impoverished heroine from the perils and uncertainties of America's market economy.

Warner, perhaps aware she risked offending American sensibilities, constructs the story so that Fleda's marriage to Carleton *can* be read as a victory for republicanism – specifically, American, Christian republicanism. At the start of the novel, Carleton is a religious sceptic. As he and Fleda become friends, however, her enthusiastic Christianity gradually converts him. Fleda makes a gift to Carleton of a bible that had belonged to her late father, an American military hero, and that is still "filled with his marks"

[4] The two novels on which I focus most are: James Fenimore Cooper, *Home as Found* (1838; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1896); George Lippard, *The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall* (1844), edited with an Introduction by Leslie Fielder (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1970).

[5] Susan Warner (writing as Elizabeth Wetherell), *Queechy* (1852; London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1898?).

[6] Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America 1820-1870*, 2nd edition (1978; Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 141-142. For more information on Warner's life see Jane Tompkins, "Afterword" to Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), with an afterword by Jane Tompkins (New York: The Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1987), 584-592.

(*Queechy*, 122). Carleton's religious education is, then, inscribed by the "marks" of American nationalism. This is significant for the novel's treatment of the *English* political system. Before Carleton's spiritual transformation we are told that he [quote] "had a very large tenantry…depending upon him, in bettering whose conditions…all [his] energies might have found full play. It never entered his head." (78). The end of the novel, set several years later, sees Fleda and a fully born-again Carleton living in Carleton's ancestral home. Carleton "'has changed the face of things, mentally and morally…[for] the poorer classes on his estate…with his adult schools, and agricultural systems'" (441). Carleton attributes his efforts to Fleda's influence, telling her, "'Your little Bible was my invaluable help'" (407).

After their marriage, Carleton's family tell Fleda they want to "'make an Englishwoman of her'" (447). Fleda resists, vowing "'always [to] keep a rag of the stars and stripes flying somewhere'" (446). Carleton concedes that, as relations between the two countries are "friendly," the US flag *should* fly alongside St. George's cross on his estate (446). He thus ensures – symbolically, at least – that the American influence on the English aristocracy will continue.

Tellingly, though, Warner stops short of recommending a complete overhaul of the English social system. At one stage, Carleton must deal with "political disturbances" that have "infected" "the people" on his lands (427). Warner maybe had in mind here the Chartist agitation of 1848. That year, with old orders tumbling across Europe, it seemed briefly that revolution might spread to England.[7] We do not see exactly how, but Carleton subdues the potential uprising, and Fleda is later told by one of his employees, "'He has the hearts of his people completely…he deserves it'" (441). The subject is then dropped, and never picked up again. *Queechy* thus seems to advocate not American-style revolution, a possibility it raises only quickly to dismiss, but instead the reform of English society from the top downwards, managed by well-born men like Carleton. Revolution in England would, of course, jeopardise Warner's Cinderella fantasy.

[7] Information on Chartism and its decline from: K. Theodore Hoppen, *The Mid-Victorian Generation 1846-1886* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 129-131; Derrick Murphy et al, *Britain 1783-1918* (London: Collins, 2003), 152-164.

Notably, the novel's final chapters conspicuously adopt the language of such fairy-tales. When Fleda arrives on Carleton's estate, she feels "lost in…[an] enchanted…woodland" (439), and calls it "a fairyland sort of place" (442).

Warner draws a picture of the English country estate that by 1852 had become familiar to Americans through the works of Washington Irving and the numerous travel writers who followed him to the Old World. Irving during the 1820s created a semi-mythical England of aristocratic mansions, crumbling castles and charming villages. He described the great aristocratic estates as picturesque, harmonious places – "little paradises," he called them.[8] Irving was censured by some American critics who saw in his "abasing admiration for things British" a treacherous rejection of American values.[9] Undoubtedly, though, he appealed to a mass American audience and established in the American popular consciousness an enduring image of Old England.[10]

Irving and his successors may have been fascinated by England's upper crust, but they rarely, if ever, attempted actually to *join* it. Irving remained, he said, a "Stranger and sojourner" on the great estates.[11] Even to fantasise about becoming an English aristocrat would for an American, surely, have been too blatant a betrayal of republicanism. The penalties for such aspirations were made clear in George Lippard's 1844 novel *Quaker City*, in which a socially ambitious American woman who schemes to marry an English earl meets a premature and most unpleasant death. Just eight years later, however, with Anglo-American relations more cordial, Warner in *Queechy* could confidently present Fleda's marriage to an English aristocrat as a happy ending, as reward for her heroine's faith and forbearance. US readers were, given the novel's continuing commercial success in America, apparently comfortable with this resolution. Indeed, the *North American*

[8] Washington Irving, *The Complete Works Volume VIII: The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819; Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 52.

[9] Lance Schachterle, "Cooper's Attitudes Towards England," www.oneonta.edu/~cooper/articles/suny/1982suny-schachterle.html Accessed: 25 April 2006.

[10] See Malcolm Bradbury, *Dangerous Pilgrimages. Trans-Atlantic Mythologies and the Novel* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1995; reprinted London: Penguin, 1996), 53-83.

[11] Irving, *The Sketch-Book*, 152.

Review even praised Warner for the scenes in *Queechy* set among the English upper classes for their potentially elevating effect on American manners: "As good republicans," the magazine's review admitted, "we ought to thank her for indicating the basis whereon we may build, even in this land of equality and fluctuation, a politeness more gentle…."[12] Like Warner herself, this reviewer yearns for something more stable than the "fluctuation" of American life. The idea of leaving America for an English "fairyland" of secure wealth and permanent social status must have held considerable appeal for those, including Warner, whose fortunes were tied to an increasingly unreliable financial system.[13]

In 1860, eight years after Warner published *Queechy*, Albert Edward, Prince of Wales embarked on a tour of North America. He was greeted by enormous crowds; quarter-of-a-million lined Broadway to welcome him to New York. The success of the tour seemed to seal America and Britain's friendship and to confirm a sea-change in American attitudes towards the English aristocracy.[14]

Of course, the American Civil War started the following year and disrupted this burgeoning Anglo-American rapprochement.[15] Nonetheless, the "fairy tale" of the American woman who marries into Old-World aristocracy persisted, and received renewed impetus in the 1870s from real-life events. American heiresses were marrying European noblemen in ever-increasing numbers, a phenomenon reported upon *ad nauseum* by US newspapers, and reflected in a proliferation of plays and novels, most

[12] From the *North American Review* 76:158 (January 1853), 119; quoted in Susan K. Harris, *19th-Century American Women's Novels: Interpretative Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 93.

[13] For information on the American economy around the 1837 Panic, see: Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America 1815-1846* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 332-363.

[14] See Ian Radforth, *Royal Spectacle: The 1860 Visit of the Prince of Wales to Canada and the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

[15] For information in Britain and the Civil War see: H.C. Allen, *Great Britain and the United States: A History of Anglo-American Relations (1783-1952)* (New York: St Martin's Press Inc, 1955), 452-517; Campbell, 95-110; H.G. Nicholas, *The United States and Great Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 33-42; Martin Crawford, *The Anglo-American Crisis of the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The* Times *and America, 1850-1862* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987); R.J.M. Blackett, *Divided Hearts: Britain and the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001); Temperley, 50-58.

famously those of Henry James. American responses to these unions were mixed. While some celebrated the "feminine conquest of foreign aristocracy," to cite an 1890 newspaper headline, many denounced the marriages as unpatriotic.[16]

Over the last hundred years, America and Britain's political relationship has, clearly, become increasingly close, and the role of aristocracy in British life less and less influential, facts that perhaps render modern retellings of the "fairy tale" less controversial for Americans today than in the 1890s.

Even so, contemporary versions of the transatlantic marriage "fairytale" are not entirely unproblematic. With this in mind, I would like to draw attention to a reality TV series entitled *American Princess*.[17] The show broadcast last summer on the US cable channel Women's Entertainment Network, a lifestyle channel whose brand identity proclaims its commitment to female empowerment.

American Princess saw ten "very average American women," as the voiceover during the first episode called the participants, taken to live in an English country mansion, trained to become "proper ladies," and set to compete against each other in a series of challenges designed to test their mastery of skills such as table etiquette, posture, and polite conversation. Paul Burrell, once Princess Diana's butler, was among those coaching, testing and judging the women, deciding which would be eliminated from the competition each week and which one would in the end win it. The show's website proclaimed that the triumphant contestant would "make their ultimate fairytale a reality…by being crowned the first American Princess, complete with the bestowal of a real British title AND $50,000."[18]

Throughout the series, contestants use language reminiscent of *Queechy*, frequently describing their experiences as a "fairytale." Almost all the women come from small

[16] "Our American Beauties," *Chicago Tribune* Sep 6, 1890: p.16; "Is Patriotism Dying," *Washington Post* Jan 18, 1897: p.7.

[17] *American Princess*, directed by Leslie Garvin, Granada Television / NBC, 2003; first broadcast: Women's Entertainment Network, August-October, 2005.

[18] www.we.tv/uploads/AmericanPrincess/episode_guide.html Accessed: 17 August 2005.

towns and many talk about the competition as an opportunity to escape mundane, lowly paid jobs. Just as Fleda's marriage to Carleton enables her to escape manual labour and financial insecurity, so *American Princess* represents for its contestants the prospect of instant wealth and upward social mobility.

However, several contestants repeatedly voice a determination, reminiscent of Fleda and Ellen Montgomery's efforts to resist Anglicisation, to remain "who I am" or to be "true to myself" in the face of their coaches' attempts to change the way they walk, talk, eat and dress. This tension becomes a recurring theme of the series. Contestants also regularly complain that what they are asked to do is "old fashioned." The show itself, through innumerable shots of old country houses, and its use of classical music, calligraphic captions and sepia tinting, implies that the women have in visiting England indeed somehow stepped backwards in time (or, at least, into a Hollywood costume drama). The series reproduces Washington Irving's "little paradise," the "fairyland" of Carleton's English estates.

The show attempts some transatlantic match-making. It features three young, handsome, very posh Englishmen – the "beaus," as they are called. Sometimes contestants must impress these men as part of their weekly challenges, and sometimes dates with them are awarded as prizes for performing well in the challenges. In *Queechy*, despite the fact that Fleda takes over management of her family's failing farm, *and* makes it profitable, *and* becomes a published poet, success for a woman in the novel's own terms is, ultimately, not such independent accomplishments, but a fairy-tale marriage. By comparison, *American Princess* does not make wedding one of the "beaus" a condition of winning the competition. In this sense, *it* does not suggest that a fairy-tale marriage is the highest achievement of a woman's life. The series does, though, require its contestants to conform to a particularly retrogressive type of femininity in order to secure the money and status that go with winning the competition. The women are, for example, warned not to discuss either "religion or politics" with the "beaus." As one contestant observes, the objective is to become a "soft-spoken, quaint, dainty girl." However, the show simultaneously celebrates those contestants who reject such conservative, Old-World

models of womanhood. To this extent, the series arguably sends out conflicting messages about female empowerment and about the desirability of joining the nobility. But that, perhaps, is no surprise, given the history of American feelings about the English aristocracy: a cultural fascination that carries with it some ideological discomforts.