

WOMEN AND COCKTAILS IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

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The telephone, coeducation, wireless telegraphy, motor cars, millionaires, bridge whist, women's rights, Sherry's, cocktails, four-day liners, pianolas, steam heat, directoire gowns, dirigible balloons, and talking machines have all contributed to an astonishing social metamorphosis. - Francis W. Crowninshield (1909)¹

My capsule history of the cocktail from its beginnings to the turn of the nineteenth century left out gender, although it was implicit that the cocktail was a male drink.² Catherine Gilbert Murdock has retold the story, putting women in the picture. She argues that women's moderate at-home drinking was to set the pattern for alcoholic consumption in the twentieth century, and it was the cocktail in particular that "legitimized as no other beverage could alcohol consumption within the home."³ Murdock locates the beginnings of this fundamental change in the period from the end of the Civil War to the turn of the century - in "Victorian America."⁴ The evidence, though convincing, tends to be circumstantial: cook books, etiquette books, and advertising. Individual cases are lacking, and imaginative literature has to fill in the gap. The purpose of the present article is to put in evidence two examples from this source. One is what I have called "Mrs. Pat's Cocktail" (1907), found in Rachel Crothers' play "The Coming of Mrs. Patrick,"⁵ and the other is the cocktail scene (as I am going to call it here) in Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899). (Murdock briefly mentions this scene.)

Rachel Crothers (1878-1958) was the leading woman playwright in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. The play under discussion opened on Nov. 6, 1907 at the Madison Square Theater in New York and had only thirteen performances. It was one of Crothers' few flops, and was never published. The manuscript is in the Archives of Illinois State University, and, thanks to Dr. Jo A. Rayfield, University Archivist, I have been able to obtain a photocopy of the relevant scene.⁶ The cocktail is an unnamed, ad hoc farrago that Mrs. Pat, as she is called in the play, uses to make young Billy even drunker than he already is and so prevent him from eloping with the unworthy Chrissy. Billy is the son of the family for which Mrs. Pat works as a nurse. Billy's mother has been bedridden for three years. Everyone is either depressed or in love. Mrs. Pat, who seems to be the social equal of the family, takes the whole situation in hand.

The cocktail is apparently served after dinner. Billy is about to depart. "If you will do it," Mrs. Pat says, i.e., if you will elope, "let's drink to the bride." Billy accepts. Mrs. Pat then suggests a cocktail. "You've never had one of my cocktails, have you, Billy? Will you drink it?" His reply: "I'll drink it if it kills me." I infer that, in 1907, in the perspective of the New York audience, a woman might know how to make a cocktail, but men did not expect a woman to be good at it. For corroboration of the first inference, note the cocktail section in the 1906 edition of Isabella Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (published in London for an American audience).

The play proceeds to justify the sexist expectation. The stage directions describe Mrs. Pat as "rushing to the sideboard and pouring some of everything into the glass." She says, "Perhaps you think I don't know how to make one, but I do." Billy replies: "I wouldn't have thought it," etc. I doubt that, at this point, the audience believed that Mrs. Pat really did know how to make a cocktail but, in the circumstances, could not or would not follow

know how in order to save Billy. So Billy's "if it kills me" defines the situation, as far as the cocktail is concerned. Even though he is the morally inferior one in this scene, he still retains, and the play actually justifies, his male superiority in the domain of cocktails.

Mrs. Pat finishes making the drink. The stage directions: "Mrs. Patrick drops an olive in the glass and holds it up to him." She takes a glass of wine. Olive, by the way, does not mean Martini or would-be Martini. In those days, the olive was a garnish in any number of cocktails. They toast the bride. Mrs. Pat's ruse succeeds, though Billy's drunken attentions soon turn to her, and she is compromised when other characters enter the room.

Kate Chopin (1851-1904) did not live to hear the acclaim that *The Awakening* now justly receives.⁷ Because this novel is, with good reason, celebrated as a proto-feminist work, the cocktail scene is a test of the female appropriation of the male drink. Will the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, who serves the cocktail, fare better than Mrs. Pat? Edna is the wife of a prosperous Creole businessman in New Orleans. The awakening of the title refers to her discovery of sexual passion, outside her marriage, and of the possibility of an authentic existence apart from the roles of wife and mother and from the conventions of social life that she is expected to follow. One of the turning points in the novel is her decision to move out of her husband's mansion and into a four-room house around the corner. (Her husband is on an extended business trip in New York, and her children are with their grandparents.) She decides to give a grand dinner before she leaves the old house, and it is at this dinner that she serves a cocktail.

The significance of this gesture emerges from the narrative line concerning her father and her relation to him. He is a Confederate colonel who bet away his bluegrass farm in Kentucky and moved to Mississippi. He comes to New Orleans to buy clothes and presents for the wedding of another daughter, Janet, and stays with Edna and his son-in-law. (Edna will refuse to attend the

The following passage is from the chapter XXIII, describing the Colonel's visit.

The Colonel drank numerous "toddlies" during the course of the day, which left him, however, imperturbed. He was an expert at concocting strong drinks. He had even invented some, to which he had given fantastic names, and for whose manufacture he required diverse ingredients that it devolved upon Edna to procure for him.

Chopin repeats the Colonel's word, "toddlies," later in this chapter. The quotation marks obviously distance her from the word, which should sound southern and quaint. In fact, it is now, in the 1890s, incorrect.⁸ Chopin uses the verb "to concoct." Apparently "to mix" is both stylistically, for the novelist, and later, for the persons in the cocktail scene, socially unacceptable. In nineteenth-century bartender's manuals, however, beginning with *Jerry Thomas' How To Mix Drinks* (1862), this verb is normal. As for the invention and naming of drinks, the bartender's manuals by themselves show the proliferation of cocktails with fantastic names. Mrs. Beeton refers to "the extraordinary names bestowed on many of these beverages" and says that she will give recipes for "the most popular, and apparently permanent, drinks."⁹ She should have been even more skeptical. Who today recognizes her "Brain Duster" or "Yankee Invigorator"?

The cocktail served by Edna is one invented by her father, as will be seen. She serves it at the dinner table in a "tiny glass" (a practice that continues today only in restaurants, though the glasses are no longer tiny).

"I may as well admit that this is my birthday, and that I am twenty-nine. In good time I expect you to drink my health. Meanwhile, I shall ask you to begin with this cocktail, composed-would you say 'composed'" with an appeal

to Miss Mayblunt—"composed by my father in honor of Sister Janet's wedding."

Before each guest stood a tiny glass that looked and sparkled like a garnet gem.

"Then, all things considered," spoke Arobin, "it might not be amiss to start out by drinking the Colonel's health in the cocktail which he composed on the birthday of the most charming of women - the daughter whom he invented."

Mr. Merriman's laugh at this sally was such a genuine outburst and so contagious that it started the dinner with an agreeable swing that never slackened.

Miss Mayblunt begged to be allowed to keep her cocktail untouched before her, just to look at. The color was marvelous! She could compare it to nothing she had ever seen, and the garnet lights which it emitted were unspeakably rare. She pronounced the Colonel an artist, and stuck to it.

(Chapter XXX)

Edna uses the up-to-date and correct word, "cocktail," not her father's "toddy." She is, however, uncertain about the term for mixing and defers to Miss Mayblunt, who is considered an intellectual but leaves "composed" uncorrected and leaves her drink untasted. Arobin, Edna's lover, tactfully repeats "composed," though, *bon vivant* that he is, he can be assumed to know the correct (i.e., as implicitly stipulated earlier by Chopin) "concoct." But he brings back the word "invented," used by Chopin earlier of the Colonel's cocktails, though he applies it to the Colonel's siring of Edna. His toast in effect creates an analogy between the Colonel's two creations, the cocktail and daughter. In this way, the patriarchal principle against which Edna has rebelled returns ironically in the cocktail that she serves at the dinner to celebrate her rebellion. The Colonel's invention of this particular cocktail belongs to a "ghost chapter" of the novel. Until now, the

Edna procured the ingredients for her father's drinks, one of which was destined to honor her sister's wedding. Her choice of this cocktail for this occasion has a kind of mockery about it. As she leaves her husband's house, she serves the wedding cocktail. But, serving the cocktail, she fails to appropriate her father's role. In terms of Arobin's toast, she remains her father's daughter. The cocktail remains masculine. In this one detail of the dinner, she has liberated herself from her father only in her use of the more advanced term "cocktail."

Both Mrs. Pat and Edna are bold, independent women who attempt to appropriate the male-gendered cocktail for their own purposes. Both show uncertainty (Edna in the case of terminology) about the drink they mix. In each case, the gesture is only partly successful. Arobin and Billy, each in his own way (and neither maliciously), undercuts the gesture. To judge by the very small amount of evidence that I have discussed, the cocktail still has a way to go before it finds the role that Murdock describes.

The cocktail could come to play this role, I believe, only because it came to be sanctioned as a high-status drink. In this respect, both Mrs. Pat and Edna are the pioneers that the cocktail needs. Mrs. Pat is a nurse but she is hardly a domestic. (And her highly respectable employers have the makings of cocktails on their sideboard.) Heublein advertisements pitched to the upwardly mobile were showing the way in the 1890s.¹⁰ But the writers of the etiquette books cited by Murdock for the first decade of the twentieth century are still expressing doubt about the appropriateness of the cocktail in polite society.¹¹

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NOTES

1. *Manners for the Metropolis* (New York: D. Appleton, 1909), 3-4. Crowninshield (1872-1947) was the first editor of *Vanity Fair* and an arbiter of manners and style.

2. *Martini, Straight Up: The Classic American Cocktail* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 75-79. Hereafter *M,SU*. This book is the second, revised edition of *The Silver Bullet: The Martini in American Civilization*, Contributions in American Studies 52 (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981).
3. *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940* (Baltimore, 1998), 105. For her history of the cocktail, see 102-110. I reviewed her book in *Social History of Alcohol Review* 36-37 (1998), 17-26.
4. Murdock, 12.
5. Previously discussed in the file "Rachel Crothers and Mrs. Pat's Cocktail" on my webpage (<http://www.geocities.com/martinisu>). The contents of that file have now been melded into this article and the file, except for a cross-reference to this article, has been removed from the webpage.
6. The play is obliquely cited in *M,SU*, 128 n. 12, in the form of a 1909 *Saturday Evening Post* article that mentions it. I had tried, and failed, to locate the play itself. For a synopsis of the plot and a digest of reviews, see Colette Lindroth and James Lindroth, *Rachel Crothers: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 16-18.
7. Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).
8. OED s.v. toddy 2. a. "A beverage composed of whisky or other spirituous liquor with hot water and sugar." The Colonel's "diverse ingredients" have brought him into the era of the cocktail. See the pages in *M,SU* cited in n. 2 above.
9. Isabella Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (London: Ward, Lock, 1906), 1510.
10. Consider the blatant upper-classness of the one I quoted in *M,SU*, 141-142; also 15, fig. 1 (the same as fig.2.2 in Murdock, 50). Of course, cocktails could be upper-class and bad, as in the case of Edith Wharton's obnoxious patrician Mrs. Carbury, who is described as "leaving everywhere in her wake a trail of cigarette ashes and cocktail glasses." See Wharton, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907; Chicago: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 354.
11. Murdock, 107.