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“But One Expects That”: Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the Shifting Light of Scholarship

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IN THE TWO DECADES since the Feminist Press issued a slim volume containing a text of “The Yellow Wallpaper” with an afterword by Elaine R. Hedges, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s remarkable work has found a secure place in contemporary literary studies. Omitting “The Yellow Wallpaper” from an American literature anthology has become almost as unthinkable as leaving out “The Raven” or “Civil Disobedience.” The story appears not just in those weighty, two-volume collections of American literature but also in textbooks for courses in women’s studies and genre studies and in dozens of introductory literature texts for undergraduates.¹ It has been analyzed by literary historians of every stripe, although feminist critics still lead the way in championing Gilman’s achievement.

By now, scholars have accumulated a wealth of information about Gilman’s life in general and about “The Yellow Wallpaper” in particular. Some “facts” have become common knowledge as critics have built on one another’s work. But those “facts” need reassessment as scholars increasingly acknowledge that literary criticism is as grounded in historical biases as the literature it seeks to interpret.

Most of the pioneering work on “The Yellow Wallpaper” occurred during the 1970s and early 1980s, when scholars like Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were challenging what they perceived to be a patriarchal literary canon and arguing for the centrality of politics in literature and literary criticism.² In 1985 Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn aptly characterized “the two major foci of feminist scholarship: deconstructing dominant male patterns of thought and social practice; and reconstructing female experience previously hidden or overlooked” (6). Just as this deconstructive project

led critics to weigh some textual elements more heavily than they did others, it led them to privilege some kinds of scholarship over others. Susan S. Lanser has persuasively argued that feminist criticism from the 1960s until the mid-1980s was “collusive with ideology”—specifically, with the ideology of a white, middle-class, heterosexual, female academy.³ Lanser points out that feminist criticism has “embraced contradictory theories of literature, proceeding as if men’s writings were ideological sign systems and women’s writings were representations of truth, reading men’s or masculinist texts with resistance and women’s or feminist texts with empathy” (422).

Like Lanser, we believe that it is necessary to revisit feminist scholars’ widely accepted readings of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” We too wonder whether critics have replicated the activity of the narrator: she reads and rereads the text “until she finds what she is looking for—no less and no more.” Critics “may have reduced the text’s complexity to what [they] need most: [their] own image reflected back to [them]” (Lanser 420). In this essay, we look at how that description applies to scholarship on Gilman’s story. Since the story’s “rediscovery” in 1973, the transmission of the text has suffered: recent editions offer variations in wording at several critical points and in the location and number of the section breaks that signal the narrator’s successive diary entries. Moreover, many received “facts” on which interpretations of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have been built—including Gilman’s valiant struggle to get her story into print, the original audience’s reading of it as a ghost story, and the irate reception it received from the male medical community—do not hold up well under scrutiny. These commonly accepted ideas regarding the work’s publication and reception histories reveal the ways critics of the 1970s introduced or overlooked evidence. The struggle to gain a foothold for women writers in literary studies and in the academy often took precedence over textual criticism and archival research into letters and reviews. A study of the textual, publication, and reception histories of “The Yellow Wallpaper” demonstrates how shifts in criticism from one era to another cast different light on the evidence surrounding the story.

Modern Misidentification of Texts

The textual history of “The Yellow Wallpaper” since 1973 illustrates changing critical priorities in the academy. The Feminist Press edition of that year gave the story wider currency than ever before, although there had already been ten reprintings since the initial publication in 1892.⁴ Hedges’s lengthy afterword aligned “The Yellow Wallpaper” with other “deliberate dramatic indictments, by women writers, of the crippling social pressures imposed on women” (*Wallpaper* 55), thereby positioning it in the feminist literary tradition then being charted by Moers, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar, and others. Hedges’s edition can justly claim to be the starting point for the renewed interest in Gilman and her work. Indeed, it has become the Feminist Press’s “all-time best-seller,” with over 200,000 copies sold (Feminist Press 16).

But what is that edition? The copyright page claims it is a “[r]eprint of the 1899 ed. published by Small, Maynard, Boston.” However, collation shows that it reprints the 1892 *New England Magazine* text and adds a few variants of its own. Some are typos with little significance—“phospites” for “phosphites” (10)—but toward the end of the story two entire sentences are omitted. The 1892 *New England Magazine* text reads:

I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines. (654)

Through what was probably a compositor’s eyeskip, the first two sentences beginning “I see her” were dropped, and only the last was included (30–31).⁵

Hedges’s edition prompted so much interest in Gilman that in 1980 Pantheon issued *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, edited by Ann Lane, a collection that made more of Gilman’s work available to a wide and eager audience. A note implies that Lane’s reprinting of “The Yellow Wallpaper” derives from the 1892 *New England Magazine* version; instead, Lane reprints the 1933 *Golden Book* magazine version, which contains

many anomalies of wording, as well as section breaks that differ from those in the 1892 and 1899 texts. While Hedges's edition is erroneously labeled a reprint of the 1899 edition, Lane's is incorrectly billed as the 1892 text when it appears in numerous college anthologies.⁶

Apparently neither Hedges nor Lane ensured that they were reprinting the editions they claimed to have used or that their texts transmitted the editions they used without error. This seeming carelessness suggests that Hedges's and Lane's scholarly priorities lay elsewhere. In fact, traditional textual scholarship in the manner of Fredson Bowers had been practiced by increasingly fewer scholars since the heyday of the Center for Editions of American Authors in the 1960s, and general literary critics in the succeeding decades privileged theoretical and political concerns. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, textual studies was newly energized by Jerome McGann's thoughtful *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (1983) and by discussions that it prompted in literary circles. Feminist scholars argued—and publishers agreed—that women authors deserved scholarly editions of their own.

The story's 1992 centennial saw the publication of Catherine Golden's *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on "The Yellow Wallpaper."* In promotional material the Feminist Press called this "companion to the feminist classic" a "critical edition," a phrase Golden repeats in her introduction (19). According to a footnote (24), the edition reprints the 1899 text and reproduces for the first time the illustrations from the 1892 magazine.⁷ However, a close look confirms that the text is simply a reissue of Hedges's edition, including every typo. Moreover, the omitted lines are restored in a footnote, after Golden asserts, "Here, the 1892 edition of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' includes the following passage" (38). She misleadingly informs readers that the 1899 edition omits the lines and that the 1892 edition contains them, when no such variance exists. The only text to omit those lines is Hedges's. Although Golden claims the authority of the term *critical edition*, she did not prepare what textual scholars would recognize by that label, for she did not collate various versions of the text. Nonetheless, the effort to identify her edition with

criticism as a critical edition and to include information about textual variants suggests that textual criticism had higher priority in the 1980s than in the early 1970s.

Other publishers besides the Feminist Press have given editions of women's works a prominent place in their annual lists. Oxford University Press's Women's Classics Series, New York University Press's Early American Women Writers Series, and Rutgers University Press's American Women Writers Series are only some of the projects to make available long-out-of-print writings by women. Rutgers University Press's recent series Women Writers: Texts and Contexts includes a volume on "The Yellow Wallpaper." Along with a biographical introduction, a chronology, background readings, bibliography, and critical essays, the book contains "the authoritative text of the story itself," according to the jacket, a text that the editors, Thomas L. Erskine and Connie L. Richards, claim is "[f]rom *New England Magazine*, January 1892" (29). Apparently aware of the discrepancies between Hedges's and Lane's texts, Erskine and Richards seem to have tried to split the difference between the two. When variants arise, they choose now from one text, now from the other, giving no rationale for their choices. They restore the lines missing from Hedges's text but also include words added in the 1933 text Lane reprinted. What Erskine and Richards have created, then, is a text that never was, a text that includes the most words, if not necessarily the right ones.

Despite their problems, these texts bear witness to textual criticism's rise in status within the academy. Misidentification of texts apparently mattered little to Hedges and Lane, but a decade or so after publication of their editions, Golden as well as Erskine and Richards paid homage to the idea (if not the actuality) of critical editions and authoritative texts.

Textual Variants and Diary Entries

In an age when the hyphen in "wall-paper" receives its share of critical ink as a "signifier" (see Feldstein), even a minor textual variant has potential consequences for literary interpretation. And some of the variants that have crept into "The Yel-

low Wallpaper” are far from minor, especially those that bear on gender issues in the story. In the discussion of variants that follows, we take the 1892 *New England Magazine* text, the first printing of the story, to be the most authoritative and make it the basis for our comparisons. Gilman’s manuscript has no necessary textual priority, for she would have expected editors to regularize punctuation in accordance with standards of her day. Moreover, Gilman offered no objection to the minor variations from her manuscript, as far as we have been able to discover. In the absence of evidence that Gilman opposed printing-house changes, the first printing stands as the version that best embodies the story Gilman presented to her contemporaries.

The first important variant, and the one most resonant with meaning, comes in the fifth paragraph. After declaring that there is “something queer” about the house, the narrator remarks, “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.” Texts that follow Lane’s, which reproduces the 1933 *Golden Book* version, print the following: “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that.” Omitting “in marriage” radically transforms the line. Why would one “expect that”? Does John laugh at the narrator because she is genuinely funny? because he thinks her a silly little woman? because she feels the house is creepy? because John is a jerk? The reader cannot know.

Other Gilman scholars do not know either, and some have attempted to clarify this ambiguity by adding loaded phrases such as “in [him]” (Parker, *Oven* 317), “in men” (Wells 177), and “in man” (Oates 154). The first addition suggests that John laughs at the narrator for reasons related to his own character. In the second and third, the narrator engages in obvious male bashing, which, though perhaps amusing, sets a definite tone for the rest of the story. More important, these two changes distort the author’s focus; Gilman is bashing marriage in particular, not men in general.

At the close of the story there is another intriguing variant. After John pounds ineffectually at her locked door, the narrator reports, “Now he’s crying for an axe” (35). Textual descendants of the 1933 *Golden Book* version render the line, “Now he’s crying to Jennie for an axe.”⁸ The 1892 wording,

which allows readers to imagine that John is literally crying, undermines his masculinity and shows his wife gaining the upper hand, at least emotionally. In the variant reading, he cries out because he needs an ax quickly in a serious situation. Furthermore, Jennie becomes John’s overt accomplice in repressing the narrator. While this interpretation may be valid (other evidence in the story suggests that Jennie acts as jailer in John’s absence), it does not arise from Gilman’s original wording in this line.

Another class of variants involves section breaks, often regarded as typographical trivia but vital to this particular work. The story is presented as if it were the narrator’s private journal, and the section breaks demarcate entries.⁹ Gilman uses these breaks to depict the narrator’s circumstances as well as her mental state. The narrator must break off writing in her secret journal each time she hears her husband or sister-in-law draw near. She signals their approach by announcing, for example, “There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word” (13) or “There’s sister on the stairs!” (18). These disruptions put her at the mercy of those who wish to suppress her writing. Later section breaks illustrate mood fluctuations. Before one break the narrator is enthusiastic and protective because she suspects that Jennie is interested in the wallpaper: “But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!” (27). Before another she is disgusted by the paper: “If those heads were covered or taken off it would not be half so bad” (30). The breaks that follow such statements act as an emotional barometer as the narrator immerses herself in contemplation of the wallpaper.

The breaks Gilman indicated in her manuscript were accurately reproduced in all the editions published during her lifetime except the last two. The tradition changed with the 1933 *Golden Book* version,¹⁰ which eliminated seven of the original breaks, associating phrases that had never been presented together before. These alterations change the narrator’s character. For instance, all the editions published before 1933 insert a break between the two sentences “I will take a nap, I guess” and “I don’t know why I should write this” (20–21). When the break is deleted, the narrator appears indecisive.

Until this point, readers might see her as emotional and fanciful but never ambivalent—she is constant in her need to discover the wallpaper's secrets.

The *Golden Book* adds five new breaks, which also affect interpretation. One is inserted between John's question "Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?" and the narrator's internal response "So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long" (24–25). A break between these related sentences makes little sense, except perhaps to show eccentric behavior in the narrator, who seems to be pausing between journal entries before she completes a thought. But the 1892 *New England Magazine* text shows the narrator completing her thoughts unless she is interrupted and forced to stop writing.

The number of section breaks is as vexed a question as the placement of them. Gilman's manuscript divides "The Yellow Wallpaper" into twelve sections, but texts published after 1973 have offered fewer and fewer diary entries without altering the story's length. Hedges's edition preserves the original number of entries, but instead of signaling the beginning of each new section typographically (with an enlarged capital or with a combination of large and small capitals, as in earlier editions), it simply uses a blank line to separate sections. Two of the original breaks fall at page breaks (20–21, 22–23), and they are not reproduced in editions based on Hedges's text. Thus Golden can state that "the story is comprised of ten diary-like entries" (12), for by the time she transmits the text those two end-of-page section breaks have disappeared. Moreover, texts based on Golden's edition will likely reduce the story to nine "diary-like entries," since the break after the narrator's remark that "[t]here is a week more, and I think that will be enough" (28) falls at the bottom of a page and before an illustration in her edition.

Erskine and Richards's "authoritative text" picks and chooses between the traditions of section breaks in Hedges's 1973 version and in the 1933 *Golden Book* version handed down through Lane's *Gilman Reader*. This newest academic edition presents a story composed of only six sections. If critics are right in thinking that the section breaks define diary entries and have some interpretive value (Janice Haney-Peritz even refers to them as

"movements" [266]), then scholars should preserve all the breaks that Gilman authorized and only those breaks.

It would certainly help critics make sense of these variants if Gilman's own pen could be linked to a post-1892 edition, especially since the *Golden Book* version was published during her lifetime and with her permission. But a study of the section breaks in that version quickly banishes this hope. Each story printed in *The Golden Book* uses the same format: there are two columns a page; an enlarged capital begins each new section; and every full page of text contains one and only one enlarged capital. Moreover, the capitals are spaced so that each two-page spread has the ornaments balanced in opposite corners, if possible. While this design made the pages visually appealing, it also forced the editors to create extra breaks when the original text lacked appropriate ones and to delete breaks when they occurred too close to the end of a page or too near one another. The section breaks in this story thus became a design feature and no longer separated diary entries. The Gilman Papers at the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College contain a clipping of the *Golden Book* version with half a dozen corrections. Five of the six restore original breaks that have been erroneously closed up, but none of the added section breaks are deleted.¹¹ Given this evidence, Gilman's involvement in or approval of the *Golden Book* version seems unlikely.

Although the possibility cannot be entirely ruled out, there is no immediate evidence that Gilman edited or approved any version of "The Yellow Wallpaper" printed during her lifetime. In her autobiography she makes passing reference to the 1899 and 1920 printings but indicates no personal supervision. Because of the sheer volume and pace of her writing after 1890, she was probably not intimately involved with editing and printing every text. Nor did she give special attention to the story that now marks her place in literary history. She told William Dean Howells that she considered "The Yellow Wallpaper" to be not "literature" but merely a story that had "a purpose," as all her other writing did (*Living* 121).

The variety of forms in which the story has been presented suggests that editors have been con-

cerned less with textual evidence than with other kinds of evidence, most notably autobiography. Many feminist critics have relied heavily and sometimes carelessly on *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*. The autobiographical nature of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the compelling story Gilman tells of her life provide ample incentive for critics to seek clues to “The Yellow Wallpaper” in *The Living*. Then, too, Gilman’s version of her life has often confirmed critics’ visions of literary history. Furthermore, two decades ago autobiography was considered a more trustworthy source of evidence and a less problematic form of discourse than it is today. However, distortion inevitably occurs when the subject of scholarly study becomes the sole source of evidence.

He Says, She Says

Scholars have wrestled with two well-known versions of the publication history of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Gilman’s and Howells’s. By now, a standard interpretation of the divergent accounts has been accepted, in part because it has been so often repeated. How critics have come to terms with these conflicting versions—the way they have resolved the “he says, she says” conundrum—reveals shifts in emphasis within the academy.

Everyone seems to agree that Gilman first sent the story to the noted editor Howells, who had praised her earlier work. On receiving the unsolicited story in early October 1890, Howells sent it to Horace Scudder, then editor of the *Atlantic*, with a note telling Scudder, “It’s pretty blood curdling, but strong, and is certainly worth reading” (Howells, Letter).¹² Scudder rejected the story, saying, according to Howells’s account, “that it was so terribly good that it ought never to be printed” (Howells, *Stories* vii). In her autobiography, Gilman recalls Scudder’s informing her that the story made him “miserable.” At this point, accounts of the story’s fate begin to differ fundamentally. Gilman claims in *The Living* that she then gave the manuscript to Henry Austin, a commercial literary agent, who eventually placed the story with *New England Magazine*. She reprints her peevish letter to the magazine’s editor in which she demands to know if he pays his contributors. Her indignation reaches

its apex when she relates that Austin apparently pocketed her profits from the publication (119). In contrast, Howells recalls that after learning of Scudder’s rejection, “I could not rest until I had corrupted the editor of *The New England Magazine* into publishing it” (*Stories* vii).

Faced with these conflicting accounts, most feminist critics have sided with Gilman in her dismissal of Howells. Of the critics in Golden’s recent collection who discuss Howells’s role in the story’s publication, three ignore his claim altogether. Others take Gilman’s account at face value, despite its inaccurate dates and titles. Among the earliest feminist critics to write on this question, Gail Parker chided Howells in 1972 for his “misgivings” about the story and claimed he “was really the enemy” of American feminists (“Introduction” 85, 89). Hedges later offered more-measured criticism of Howells’s “limitations” (“Afterword” 125). Gradually, critics begin to cast Gilman in a heroic mold, asserting, as Conrad Shumaker did in 1985, that after Scudder’s rejection “Gilman persevered” and got the story published (242). Golden scolds Howells for what she calls his “self-congratulatory tone” and his “belief” that he had something to do with the story’s acceptance (55). The most recent collection of essays on “The Yellow Wallpaper” proposes a handy compromise between Howells’s version and Gilman’s: “Gilman hired Henry Austin, a literary agent, who finally placed the story, with Howells’s intervention and support, in *New England Magazine* in 1892” (Erskine and Richards 7).

Many feminist critics of the 1970s accepted—and perhaps even required—a publication history that cast Gilman in the role of beleaguered heroine. Later feminist critics did not question their predecessors’ work and lent their own authority to this history. Now that the court of critical opinion has recognized the value of Gilman’s work, scholars can ask what evidence exists to support either version of events. If Howells scholars are correct in characterizing him as an honest and modest autobiographer, it would seem unlikely that he invented the episode or exaggerated his own contribution to the story’s publication.¹³ Nevertheless, Howells’s claim to have “corrupted” the editor of *New*

England Magazine provides ample reason for further investigation. In fact, that editor was Edwin Doak Mead, a first cousin of Howells's wife, Elinor. Mead had benefited from Howells's patronage: just when Howells had become influential as the assistant editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he brought the seventeen-year-old Mead to Boston from New Hampshire (Mann 442). If Howells exerted personal pressure on Mead, he may well have been reluctant to elaborate publicly on his machinations. This reluctance would account for his coy reference nearly three decades later to a form of "corruption." It is also possible that Gilman either did not know or forgot about Howells's claim that he had a hand in the story's publication. According to Joanne B. Karpinski's study of Gilman's relationship with Howells, Gilman's "failure to credit Howells . . . follow[ed] a pattern of denying the actual contributions of those who, in Gilman's opinion, ought to have done more" (228).

The story of a heroic woman author fighting valiantly in defiance of a thwarting male editorial presence makes for great drama, capped as it is with a male agent's theft of the profit that should have gone to the woman who would later write *Women and Economics*. Elizabeth Ammons comments accurately, though without any apparent irony, that this outcome "seems almost unbelievably fitting" (42). Perhaps the "unbelievable" should not be believed—at least not without corroborating evidence.

Despite all the ink that has been expended on subjectivity in autobiography (see, e.g., Spengemann; Jelinek), Gilman scholars have not always challenged the subject's authority. As early as 1975, Beate Schöpp-Schilling reprimanded her peers for relying "exclusively on Gilman's own interpretation of her life." She explained that memoirs "can never be taken at face value for autobiographical statements combine fact and fiction" (285). A few years later, Juliann E. Fleenor warned against "reading an autobiography as a factual transcription of a life rather than as a literary form" (236). *The Living*, Fleenor points out, presents "the heroine of the autobiography [as] an injured woman." Gilman carefully crafts her self-portrait for her readers, "even to the point of omitting or misrepresenting some events" (Fleenor 240).

These cautions notwithstanding, leading Gilman scholars have based their interpretations of Gilman's life and work on her own accounts. Lane, for instance, notes that much of the information she relies on in her biography of Gilman "comes filtered through Charlotte's pen." In the preface of *To Herland*, Lane tries to assert the neutrality of that filter, saying that Gilman "largely restrained her impulse to reshape her story by relying greatly on diaries and letters" (xiii). But diaries and letters are among the forms of discourse in which authors "reshape" their stories for their own purposes. Lane later acknowledges that "there is much in [*The Living*,] as in all autobiographies, of fiction, of self-deception, of purposeful misleading, of a refashioned and recrafted life, of a persona created for the occasion" (353), but by this point Lane has given her readers more than 350 pages of biography heavily dependent on Gilman's version of her life.

Gilman's version of events may someday be substantiated, but not until scholars move outside her own discourse for support. If Gilman did rely on diaries and letters in writing her autobiography, what do those documents show? In a recent edition of Gilman's diaries, Denise D. Knight identifies Austin not as Henry Austin but as Alfred Austin, editor of the *National Review* (432).¹⁴ Perhaps Gilman's extant correspondence includes letters to Henry and Alfred Austin or the one from Horace Scudder? Is the actual letter to the editor of *New England Magazine* as self-righteous and accusatory as the one Gilman includes in *The Living*? Gilman mistakenly gives May 1891 as the publication date of "The Yellow Wallpaper," but that date is closer to the publication of her first piece for *New England Magazine*, "The Giant Wistaria" (June 1891). Is it not likely that she would inquire about the journal's payment policies after the publication of her first story rather than her second? And if Henry Austin did act as her agent with *New England Magazine*, perhaps he absconded with the payment for "Wistaria," not for "Wallpaper." There is no way to resolve these questions without looking beyond Gilman's own claims.

The point here is not to determine whether Gilman's or Howells's version of events is correct. Hers has the satisfying shape of well-crafted drama,

while his can be backed by a preponderance of circumstantial evidence but nothing more. But what Lanser notes about earlier feminists' contradictory behavior toward men's and women's literary texts seems equally true for documentary evidence: critics have treated men's testimony with "resistance" and women's with "empathy."

Ghosts and Male Murderers

Just as the story's publication history has become part of the Gilman legend, entrenched ideas about the work's initial reception as a ghost story or as a story that male doctors sought to suppress have contributed substantially to the feminist mythology surrounding Gilman. When Hedges reintroduced "The Yellow Wallpaper" to the literary world, she remarked that "in its time . . . the story was read essentially as a Poe-esque tale of chilling horror" (39). Gilman herself made the analogy with Poe (*Living* 119), and the chilling qualities of the tale did draw the attention of its early readers: writing in the *Conservator* in 1899, Anne Montgomerie praises the story for its "perfect crescendo of horror" (61), while an anonymous Baltimore reviewer notes that the piece "has a touch of ghastliness" ("Question"). Similarly, Howells points to the story's ability to "freeze our young blood" and remarks, "I shiver over it as much as I did when I first read it in manuscript" (*Stories* vii). Many readers of the story have been troubled by its powerful subject matter, but there is a definite distinction between a tale of horror and a tale of ghosts.

Pioneering feminist critics of Gilman's work blurred this distinction, but editors of college anthologies crystallized interpretation into adamant fact. Lane first suggested that "'The Yellow Wallpaper' ha[d] often been reprinted as a horror story," pointing to Howells's 1920 anthology (Lane, *Gilman Reader* xvii). However, Howells's *Great Modern American Stories* can be regarded as a collection of horror stories only if the term's definition is stretched to include Mark Twain's "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Bret Harte's "Outcasts of Poker Flat," and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "The Revolt of 'Mother.'" Lane goes on to assert that "horror writer H. P. Lovecraft called ['The Yellow Wallpaper'] one of the

great 'spectral tales' in American literature," but her footnote for this quotation merely offers "thanks to Paul Buhle for providing this piece of information" (xvii, xli).

Golden follows up on this lead and supports Lane's claim: "As recently as 1973, horror writer H. P. Lovecraft included ['The Yellow Wallpaper'] as a 'classic example in subtly delineating the madness which crawls over a woman dwelling in the hideously papered room' in a collection titled *Supernatural Horror in Literature*" (Golden 3). Lovecraft's book is not a recent "collection" of supernatural tales, however, but a critical study of horror tales in world literature that was published in 1945 and reprinted in 1973.¹⁵ Lovecraft mentions Gilman only in passing, praising her for "ris[ing] to a classic level" in her delineation of madness (72).

The outlines of the reception myth suggested in collections of Gilman's work have been solidified in college anthologies. A 1993 Macmillan anthology flatly states that "'The Yellow Wallpaper' was initially read as a ghost story in the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe" (Rubenstein and Larson 387). Similarly, the study questions in the *Heath Introduction to Fiction* tell students that "'The Yellow Wallpaper' was long thought to be a simple 'ghost story'" (Clayton 234). Likewise, the instructor's guide for the original edition of the widely used *Heath Anthology of American Literature* suggests that teachers ask students to consider why the story has "been read as a gothic thriller rather than a story about the sexual politics of marriage" (Stanford 349).¹⁶

Modern critics, beginning with Hedges, seem to imply that "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been read either as a horror story or as a story of sexual politics, more specifically that the late-nineteenth-century audience read it as horror but that the enlightened readers of a century later see it accurately. Hedges contends, and others repeat her assertion, that "no one seems to have made the connection between the insanity and the sex, or sexual role, of the victim, no one explored the story's implications for male-female relationships in the nineteenth century" (41).¹⁷ Yet reviews demonstrate that the story's first readers did recognize its indictments of marriage and of the treatment of

women, although these discussions do not use modern terminology. Three reviews of the 1899 Small, Maynard edition identify the cause of the narrator's insanity as her husband, a man whom one reviewer calls a "blundering, well-intentioned male murderer" (Rev. of "The Yellow Wallpaper," *News*). Another, writing in *Time and the Hour*, declares the edition "a book to keep away from the young wife," presumably because the "story is calculated to prevent girls from marrying." Henry B. Blackwell, writing in the *Woman's Journal* in 1899, ascribes the narrator's madness to "the effort of her husband" and recommends that the book be "widely perpetuated and circulated." Ironically, it is Blackwell, a male reviewer, who argues most forcefully that the narrator's madness results not from any hereditary condition or extraordinary ill-treatment but from the average wife's narrow and isolated life:

Nothing more graphic and suggestive has ever been written to show why so many women go crazy, especially farmers' wives, who live lonely, monotonous lives. A husband of the kind described in this little sketch once said that he could not account for his wife's having gone insane—"for," said he, "to my certain knowledge she has hardly left her kitchen and bedroom in 30 years."

Moreover, Shumaker observes that Howells for one "understood quite clearly the source of the story's effect" and asserts that the story was unpopular because, as Howells recognized, it "struck too deeply and effectively at traditional ways of seeing the world and woman's place in it" (251). Shumaker's voice has gone unheeded by feminist critics such as Haney-Peritz, who prefer to generalize about a "male line of response" (262).

Jean E. Kennard contends that a feminist reading could not emerge until audiences grasped certain literary conventions—particularly those associated with "patriarchy, madness, space, [and] quest" (78)—but her premise that "no earlier reader saw the story as in any way positive" (75) obscures the tensions and complexities in Gilman's text, particularly the gender constructions in play between the story and its original readers. To misunderstand these early readers' language of

horror as the language of the supernatural is to misinterpret their efforts to read politically in their own times. The story of a female writer driven mad, in part by her husband, was a horrifying subject. Reviewers recognized its subversive undercurrents and treated the story with caution. Their comments may sometimes gloss over the radical social commentary of the story, but the evidence indicates that they saw Gilman's feminist message.

"Why do you think readers became aware of [the] social and psychological reality [of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'] only so recently?" the editor of one recent college anthology asks students (Clayton 234). To reword that question in the current context, Why do critics seem to need oppositional myth-frames in literary history to legitimize the study of a remarkable piece of writing? What is gained by identifying "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a hitherto victimized piece of literature? One answer lies in the academy's built-in bias in favor of the new: scholars engaged in enlarging knowledge privilege new interpretations, new facts, new documents. There would be scant pleasure in unearthing a nineteenth-century story if the original audience read it exactly as twentieth-century readers do. The thrill comes in finding the gem that others have overlooked. Critics must differentiate themselves from earlier readers, not just for self-gratification but also to validate the importance of the find.

Another answer comes from the way criticism is embedded in the ideological constructs of its time. Feminist critics of the 1970s garnered evidence to confirm their version of literary history as a patriarchal exclusion of women writers. This version is not necessarily incorrect but, rather, incomplete. Examination of another legend about the initial reception of "The Yellow Wallpaper" indicates what happens when critics stop looking for evidence after they find "facts" that validate their interpretations.

Perilous Doctors

One of the best-rubbed chestnuts of Gilman criticism concerns the hostility Gilman faced from her contemporary audience, especially from the male-dominated medical community. According to Gil-

man, "The Yellow Wallpaper" made a "tremendous impression" (*Living* 119) and even elicited a letter of protest from a Boston physician. Hedges first called modern critics' attention to the warning of "a doctor" that such stories were "perilous stuff" (*Wallpaper* 61, 41), and others have followed her lead. Golden describes how one "protester, an anonymous male physician, argued to censure the story of 'deadly peril'" (4); Jeffrey Berman notes the "anger and ill will" of the Boston physician (236); and Haney-Peritz places this doctor at the head of "a long line of male readers" (261).

The source for these reports is—once again—the author herself. In "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" Gilman describes the correspondent as "a Boston physician," adding that "he said" stories like hers "ought not to be written." Twenty-two years later, she reprinted the letter in her autobiography as evidence of the hostility the story initially faced (*Living* 120).

A look at the *Boston Evening Transcript* for 8 April 1892 undercuts Gilman's cry of male censorship. A letter to the editor entitled "Perilous Stuff" indeed proposes that the vivid portrayal of a woman's mental deterioration is inappropriate subject matter for publication. "Should such stories be allowed to pass without protest, without severest censure?" the writer demands. But the letter includes not the slightest suggestion of the writer's sex or occupation. Its language merely implies that the writer has a close relationship with a mentally ill person: "The story can hardly, it would seem, give pleasure to any reader, and to many, whose lives have been touched through the nearest ties by this dread disease, it must bring the keenest pain" (M. D.). This distress seems more characteristic of a spousal, parental, or sibling relationship than of a doctor-patient relationship, and certainly either sex is capable of such sensitivity. But the writer's identity remains a mystery, for the letter is signed "M. D." The space between the two letters signals that they are initials of a proper name, which could belong as easily to a woman as to a man.

In *The Living*, Gilman chooses to interpret the initials as a doctor's signature. When she reprints the letter, she closes up the space between the initials, presenting the writer as an "M.D." Changing "the nearest ties" to the "dearest ties," either by

mistake or by design, she obscures the implication that the writer and the patient are related. She follows the letter with that of "another doctor," thereby confirming the erroneous impression she has created.

In relying on Gilman's account without checking the original newspaper, critics have failed to consider how Gilman's expectations or motives may have colored her perception and transmission of the letter. Since her story seems designed to criticize common medical practices toward women and the mentally ill, Gilman may have anticipated an angry response from offended doctors and husbands and seen only what she expected to see when she read the letter. Moreover, if the writer were a male doctor, he would further exemplify men's attempts to suppress women's creative expression, like the male editors who tried to suppress Gilman's story and the husband who tries to suppress the narrator's writing. By providing support for arguments about women's struggles throughout literary history, this tale of a censorious male doctor served the purposes of critics following Hedges's lead in the 1970s as fully as it had Gilman's.

Mitchell's Conversion

The real villain in the history of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not an anonymous male physician or even Howells but the celebrated neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, under whose supervision Gilman endured the famous rest cure. What better closure for that troubled history than for Mitchell, influenced by Gilman's fiction, to alter his cure and mend his evil ways. Not surprisingly, the story of this apt conclusion originates in Gilman's accounts. In three successive versions, the author fleshes out the details of the story's effect and heightens her sense of mission in writing it.

An early typescript history of the story refers generally to "an eminent specialist" who "state[d] that he had changed his treatment of neurasthenia since reading it" (Gilman, "History").¹⁸ Gilman's second version, "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" which was published in the *Forerunner* in 1913, elaborates on the response of a "noted specialist," to whom Gilman says she sent a copy of her story. Though he "never acknowledged it," he

must have received it, for she notes that "[m]any years later [she] was told that the great specialist had admitted to friends of his that he had altered his treatment of neurasthenia since reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*." The purpose of the story, she adds in this account, was "to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked."

In her autobiography, published after a lapse of two more decades, Gilman repeats the tale:

But the real purpose of the story was to reach Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, and convince him of the error of his ways. I sent him a copy as soon as it came out, but got no response. However, many years later, I met some one who knew close friends of Dr. Mitchell's who said he had told them that he had changed his treatment of nervous prostration since reading "*The Yellow Wallpaper*." If that is a fact, I have not lived in vain.
(*Living* 121)

Thus Gilman decides that her "real purpose" was to reach Mitchell, whom she here first identifies by name. Moreover, his "friends" become "close friends," lending weight to this third-hand report of the story's effect. In this final retelling Gilman falls back on melodramatic clichés—"the error of his ways," "I have not lived in vain"—as if to cast herself as the noble heroine who reforms the wicked villain.

One after another, Gilman's biographers and critics reiterate her assertions without commentary or challenge.¹⁹ Even Berman, whose article about the "unrestful cure" provides well-researched information about Mitchell's medical contributions, repeats her report that Mitchell changed his cure, quotes her remark about "sav[ing] people from being [driven] crazy," and adds, "No work of literature can accomplish more than this" (237). We have found no evidence to support Gilman's version of events other than her memoirs. Discussions of Mitchell's career never mention Gilman's course of treatment or her famous short story. Mitchell's published letters contain no hint that he altered his thinking about the rest cure; on the contrary, as late as 1908 he wrote to Andrew Carnegie that he wanted to build a hospital for "Rest Treatment for the Poor." Far from abandoning his methods, Mitchell proposed to extend them beyond the mid-

dle and upper classes, some sixteen years after Gilman's story appeared (Robson 344).

Critical Watchfulness

Hedges recently pointed to "an early critical investment" on the part of feminist critics "in finding some degree of triumph" in "*The Yellow Wallpaper*." Her remarks focused on whether the narrator's madness at the story's close constitutes success or failure ("Out" 326). That same problematic that Lanser describes as ideological collusion needs to be extended to the gathering and assessment of evidence (422). The dramatic story of Saint Charlotte and the evil Doctor Mitchell, the indignant outcry of the "Boston physician," the misreading of a searing indictment of marriage as a mere ghost story, the hostility of the male-dominated literary marketplace, the heroic struggles of the undaunted woman author—these notions went unchallenged because they meshed with what those seeking to recover Gilman from obscurity expected and hoped to find. Later critics operating from within the same frame of reference failed to challenge the prevailing wisdom.

American literature would certainly be the poorer without "*The Yellow Wallpaper*," but an understanding of such stories and of the culture that produced them requires careful scrutiny of assumptions made by critics and by texts and writers of the past. Of course, Gilman's story is not the only text that bears the marks of invested scholarship. A similar effect has doubtless occurred not only for other authors and texts "rediscovered" by feminist critics but also perhaps for any works recovered when textual and scholarly exactitude was not a critical priority. It seems inevitable that critics seeking recognition for previously ignored, forgotten, or suppressed individuals or groups—women, gay men and lesbians, writers of color, to name a few—should channel their energies single-mindedly toward a compelling political struggle. Less obvious, but no less common, are biases that attend the induction of a young author into the pantheon of acknowledged masters. Young writers typically portray themselves as battling hostility from the critical establishment or suffering neglect in their own lands. For example, Theodore Dreier

ser's tale of the vexed publication history of *Sister Carrie* offers contours remarkably similar to those of Gilman's story.²⁰ Once battles for recognition have been won, however, critical notions that have served as rallying cries need to shift. Motives and methods—of authors and of scholars who study them—need to be reassessed, along with the evidence that undergirds literary interpretation. The cycle of revaluation will continue as long as the vitality of literary texts endures. But one expects that in scholarship.

Notes

¹"The Yellow Wallpaper" appears in the most recent American literature anthologies published by Harcourt (1st ed., 1991), Harper (2nd ed., 1993), Heath (2nd ed., 1994), Macmillan (5th ed., 1993), Norton (4th ed., 1994), and Prentice (1st ed., 1991). The story can also be found in textbooks marketed for courses in women's studies, for example, *American Women Writers: Diverse Voices in Prose since 1845*, edited by Eileen Barrett and Mary Cullinan (St. Martin's, 1992) and *Rediscoveries: American Short Stories by Women, 1800–1916*, edited by Barbara H. Solomon (Mentor, 1994). Recent introductory fiction anthologies that reprint "The Yellow Wallpaper" include *Fictions*, edited by Joseph F. Trimmer and C. Wade Jennings (Harcourt, 1989); *Short Fiction: Classic and Contemporary*, edited by Charles H. Bohner (Prentice, 1989); *Lives and Moments*, edited by Hans Ostrom (Holt, Rinehart, 1991); *The Longwood Introduction to Fiction*, edited by Sven Birkerts (Allyn, 1992); *Fiction 100* (Macmillan, 1992) and *Fiction 50* (Macmillan, 1993), both edited by James H. Pickering; *The Situation of the Story*, edited by Diana Young (Bedford, 1993); *Fiction's Many Worlds*, edited by Charles E. May (Heath, 1993); *Stories: An Anthology and an Introduction*, edited by Eric S. Rabkin (Harper, 1995); and *The Story and Its Writer*, edited by Ann Charters (Bedford, 1995).

²For a cogent summary of how Moers's *Literary Women* (1976), Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), and Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) "strive to define a distinctively female tradition in literature" in contrast to the patriarchal male tradition, see Moi 50–69.

³Lanser examines six studies of "The Yellow Wallpaper" published between 1973 and 1986, but she traces the theoretical positions of academic feminist criticism in the United States back to the 1960s.

⁴Contrary to the belief that the story was "quickly relegated to the backwaters of our literary landscape," as Kolodny claims (459), it saw print in mainstream publications far more than might be expected for a "suppressed" literary work.

⁵Unless otherwise indicated, references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" are to Hedges's text, since it is the most widely available.

⁶Among the anthologies listed in note 1, those edited by Barrett and Cullinan; Trimmer and Jennings; Bohner; Ostrom; Birkerts; Young; and Charters reprint Lane's version of the story. That version is also reprinted in several of the American literature anthologies listed in note 1: those published by Harper, Macmillan, and Norton.

⁷The final illustration showing the narrator crawling over her prostrate husband is reversed in this volume (41). Golden analyzes the illustrations at some length but gives no reason for the reversal (4–6).

⁸Evidence points to the *Golden Book* as the source for the reading. There the variant reads "to Jenny," although John's sister's name is spelled "Jennie" elsewhere in the story. Subsequent versions regularize the spelling as "Jennie" in this line.

⁹Several critics have explored the contradictions inherent in this form. See, for instance, Treichler; Haney-Peritz.

¹⁰This version was reprinted in 1934 in *A Book of the Short Story*.

¹¹The clipping is located in folder 260. The erroneous date "October 1934" is inscribed in ink on the first page in what looks to be Gilman's hand. The six corrections, which seem to be in pencil, unfortunately are not distinctive enough to indicate whose hand they represent.

¹²This letter is quoted by permission of the Houghton Library at Harvard University.

¹³On Howells's "high standard of honesty" in his memoirs, see, for example, Lynn 39–40, 320; Cady 204–08.

¹⁴Knight offers no evidence to support this identification, but the discrepancy is worth noting.

¹⁵Golden implies that Lovecraft played an active part in the publication of the 1973 volume; since he died in 1937, this assertion is probably not true (though with a writer of the supernatural, one is never sure).

¹⁶The instructor's guide accompanying the newly issued second edition softens this approach, saying that the story "seems not to have been read as it is read today, as a critique of marriage and of medical treatment of women." The guide then evokes Poe, asking whether "The Yellow Wallpaper" might have "been perceived as similar to a Poe story" (Alberti 423–24).

¹⁷"Not until 1973," says Lane, "was it read from a feminist perspective" (*Gilman Reader* xvii). She repeats this claim in her 1990 biography of Gilman, *To Herland and Beyond*, declaring that Hedges's afterword is the "first feminist reading" and that the story "was originally seen as a horror story" (130). Golden echoes Lane: "Howells did not remark in his very brief introduction that 'The Yellow Wallpaper' also 'wanted [more than] two generations' for its feminist thrust or its polemical intent to be appreciated" (7).

¹⁸A hand-printed note, signed with the initials of Gilman's daughter Katherine Beecher Stetson Chamberlin, claims that the undated typescript is a "[n]ote left by C.P.G." The typescript seems to have served as the basis for "Why I Wrote 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" The typescript is quoted by permission of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College.

¹⁹Golden anthologizes the work of half a dozen critics who lend credence to Gilman's account by failing to comment on it. See Golden 8; Parker, "Introduction" 84; Gilbert and Gubar

147; Treichler 199–200; Berman 237. Jacobus alone notes that the story is "hearsay" and describes Mitchell as a "surrogate for the absent father whom Gilman also tried to 'convert' through her writing" (278).

²⁰The Norton Critical Edition of *Sister Carrie* reprints Dreiser's preface to the 1932 Modern Library edition, along with other documents that contribute to what Donald Pizer labels "the legend of the suppression of *Sister Carrie*" (465).

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