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Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper"

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Almost immediately in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper," the female narrator tells us she is "sick." Her husband, "a physician of high standing," has diagnosed her as having a "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency."[1] Yet her journal—in whose words the story unfolds—records her own resistance to this diagnosis and, tentatively, her suspicion that the medical treatment it dictates—treatment that confines her to a room in an isolated country estate—will not cure her. She suggests that the diagnosis itself, by undermining her own conviction that her "condition" is serious and real, may indeed be one reason why she does not get well.

A medical diagnosis is a verbal formula representing a constellation of physical symptoms and observable behaviors. Once formulated, it dictates a series of therapeutic actions. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the diagnosis of hysteria or depression, conventional "women's diseases" of the nineteenth century, sets in motion a therapeutic regimen which involves language in several ways. The narrator is forbidden to engage in normal social conversation; her physical isolation is in part designed to remove her from the possibility of over-stimulating intellectual discussion. She is further encouraged to exercise "self-control" and avoid expressing negative thoughts and fears about her illness; she is also urged to keep her fancies and superstitions in check. Above all, she is forbidden to "work"—to write. Learning to monitor her own speech, she develops an artificial feminine self who reinforces the terms of her husband's expert diagnosis: this self attempts to speak reasonably and in "a very quiet voice," refrains from crying in his presence, and hides the fact that she is keeping a journal. This male-identified self disguises the true underground narrative: a confrontation with language.

Because she does not feel free to speak truthfully "to a living soul," she confides her thoughts to a journal—"dead paper"—instead. The only safe language is dead language. But even the journal is not altogether safe. The

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opening passages are fragmented as the narrator retreats from topic after topic (the first journal entry consists of 39 separate paragraphs). The three points at which her language becomes more discursive carry more weight by contrast. These passages seem at first to involve seemingly unobjectionable, safe topics: the house, her room, and the room's yellow wallpaper. Indeed, the very first mention of the wallpaper expresses conventional hyperbole: "I never saw worse paper in my life." But the language at once grows unexpected and intense:

> One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.
>
> It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions (13).

Disguised as an acceptable feminine topic (interest in decor), the yellow wallpaper comes to occupy the narrator's entire reality. Finally, she rips it from the walls to reveal its real meaning. Unveiled, the yellow wallpaper is a metaphor for women's discourse. From a conventional perspective, it first seems strange, flamboyant, confusing, outrageous: the very act of women's writing produces discourse which embodies "unheard of contradictions." Once freed, it expresses what is elsewhere kept hidden and embodies patterns that the patriarchal order ignores, suppresses, fears as grotesque, or fails to perceive at all. Like all good metaphors, the yellow wallpaper is variously interpreted by readers to represent (among other things) the "pattern" which underlies sexual inequality, the external manifestation of neurasthenia, the narrator's unconscious, the narrator's situation within patriarchy.[2] But an emphasis on discourse—writing, the act of speaking, language—draws us to the central issue in this particular story: the narrator's alienation from work, writing, and intellectual life. Thus the story is inevitably concerned with the complicated and charged relationship between women and language: analysis then illuminates particular points of conflict between patriarchal language and women's discourse. This conflict in turn raises a number of questions relevant for both literary and feminist scholarship: In what senses can language be said to be oppressive to women? How do feminist linguistic innovations seek to escape this oppression? What is the relationship of innovation to material conditions? And what does it mean, theoretically, to escape the sentence that the structure of patriarchal language imposes?

i. The Yellow Wallpaper

The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" has come with her husband to an isolated country estate for the summer. The house, a "colonial mansion," has

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been untenanted for years through some problem with inheritance. It is "the most beautiful place!" The grounds contain "hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people" (11). Despite this palatial potential to accommodate many people, the estate is virtually deserted with nothing growing in its greenhouses. The narrator perceives "something queer about it" and believes it may be haunted.

She is discouraged in this and other fancies by her sensible physician-husband who credits only what is observable, scientific, or demonstrable through facts and figures. He has scientifically diagnosed his wife's condition as merely "a temporary nervous depression"; her brother, also a noted physician, concurs in this opinion. Hence husband and wife have come as physician and patient to this solitary summer mansion in quest of cure. The narrator reports her medical regimen to her journal, together with her own view of the problem:

> So I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again.
>
> Personally, I disagree with their ideas.
>
> Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good.
>
> But what is one to do? (10).

Her room at the top of the house seems once to have been a nursery or a playroom with bars on the windows and "rings and things on the walls." The room contains not much more than a mammoth metal bed. The ugly yellow wallpaper has been stripped off in patches—perhaps by the children who formerly inhabited the room. In this "atrocious nursery" the narrator increasingly spends her time. Her husband is often away on medical cases, her baby makes her nervous, and no other company is permitted her. Disturbed by the wallpaper, she asks for another room or for different paper; her husband urges her not to give way to her "fancies." Further, he claims that any change would lead to more change: "after the wall-paper was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on" (14). So no changes are made, and the narrator is left alone with her "imaginative power and habit of story-making" (15). In this stimulus-deprived environment, the "pattern" of the wallpaper becomes increasingly compelling: the narrator gradually becomes intimate with its "principle of design" and unconventional connections. The figure of a woman begins to take shape behind the superficial pattern of the paper. The more the wallpaper comes alive, the less inclined is the narrator to write in her journal—"dead paper." Now with three weeks left of the summer and her relationship with the wallpaper more and more intense, she asks once more to be allowed to leave. Her husband refuses: "I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger, I could and

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would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know" (23). She expresses the fear that she is not getting well. "Bless her little heart!" he responds, "She shall be as sick as she pleases" (24). When she hesitantly voices the belief that she may be losing her mind, he reproaches her so vehemently that she says no more. Instead, in the final weeks of the summer, she gives herself up to the wallpaper. "Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be," she tells her journal. "You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was" (27). She reports that her husband judges her "to be flourishing in spite of my wall-paper."

She begins to strip off the wallpaper at every opportunity in order to free the woman she perceives is trapped inside. She becomes increasingly aware of this woman and other female figures creeping behind the surface pattern of the wallpaper: there is a hint that the room's previous female occupant has left behind the marks of her struggle for freedom. Paranoid by now, the narrator attempts to disguise her obsession with the wallpaper. On the last day, she locks herself in the room and succeeds in stripping off most of the remaining paper. When her husband comes home and finally unlocks the door, he is horrified to find her creeping along the walls of the room. "I've got out at last," she tells him triumphantly, "And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back" (36). Her husband faints, and she is obliged to step over him each time she circles the room.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" was read by nineteenth-century readers as a harrowing case study of neurasthenia. Even recent readings have treated the narrator's madness as a function of her individual psychological situation. A feminist reading emphasizes the social and economic conditions which drive the narrator—and potentially all women—to madness. In these readings, the yellow wallpaper represents (1) the narrator's own mind, (2) the narrator's unconscious, (3) the "pattern" of social and economic dependence which reduces women to domestic slavery. The woman in the wallpaper represents (1) the narrator herself, gone mad, (2) the narrator's unconscious, (3) all women. While these interpretations are plausible and fruitful, I interpret the wallpaper to be women's writing or women's discourse, and the woman in the wallpaper to be the representation of women that becomes possible only after women obtain the right to speak. In this reading, the yellow wallpaper stands for a new vision of women—one which is constructed differently from the representation of women in patriarchal language. The story is thus in part about the clash between two modes of discourse: one powerful, "ancestral," and dominant; the other new, "impertinent," and visionary. The story's outcome makes a statement about the relationship of a visionary feminist project to material reality.

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ii. Diagnosis and Discourse

It is significant that the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is keeping a journal, confiding to "dead paper" the unorthodox thoughts and perceptions she is reluctant to tell to a "living soul." Challenging and subverting the expert prescription that forbids her to write, the journal evokes a sense of urgency and danger. "There comes John," she tells us at the end of her first entry, "and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word" (13). We, her readers, are thus from the beginning her confidantes, implicated in forbidden discourse.

Contributing to our suspense and sense of urgency is the ambiguity of the narrator's "condition," whose etiology is left unstated in the story. For her physician-husband, it is a medical condition of unknown origin to be medically managed. Certain imagery (the "ghostliness" of the estate, the "trouble" with the heirs) suggests hereditary disease. Other evidence points toward psychological causes (e.g., postpartum depression, failure to adjust to marriage and motherhood). A feminist analysis moves beyond such localized causes to implicate the economic and social conditions which, under patriarchy, make women domestic slaves. In any case, the fact that the origin of the narrator's condition is never made explicit intensifies the role of diagnosis in putting a name to her "condition."

Symptoms are crucial for the diagnostic process. The narrator reports, among other things, exhaustion, crying, nervousness, synesthesia, anger, paranoia, and hallucination. "Temporary nervous depression" (coupled with a "slight hysterical tendency") is the medical term that serves to diagnose or define these symptoms. Once pronounced, and reinforced by the second opinion of the narrator's brother, this diagnosis not only names reality but also has considerable power over what that reality is now to be: it dictates the narrator's removal to the "ancestral halls" where the story is set and generates a medical therapeutic regimen that includes physical isolation, "phosphates or phosphites," air, and rest. Above all, it forbids her to "work." The quotation marks, registering her husband's perspective, discredit the equation of writing with true work. The diagnostic language of the physician is coupled with the paternalistic language of the husband to create a formidable array of controls over her behavior.

I use "diagnosis," then, as a metaphor for the voice of medicine or science that speaks to define women's condition. Diagnosis is powerful and public; representing institutional authority, it dictates that money, resources, and space are to be expended as consequences in the "real world." It is a male voice that privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable. It is the voice of male logic and male judgment which dismisses superstition and refuses to see the house as haunted or the narrator's condition as serious. It

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imposes controls on the female narrator and dictates how she is to perceive and talk about the world. It is enforced by the "ancestral halls" themselves: the rules are followed even when the physician-husband is absent. In fact, the opening imagery—"ancestral halls," "a colonial mansion," "a haunted house"—legitimizes the diagnostic process by placing it firmly within an institutional frame: medicine, marriage, patriarchy. All function in the story to define and prescribe.

In contrast, the narrator in her nursery room speaks privately to her journal. At first she expresses her views hesitantly, "personally." Her language includes a number of stereotypical features of "women's language": not only are its topics limited, it is marked formally by exclamation marks, italics, intensifiers, and repetition of the impotent refrain, "What is one to do?"[3] The journal entries at this early stage are very tentative and clearly shaped under the stern eye of male judgment. Oblique references only hint at an alternative reality. The narrator writes, for example, that the wallpaper has been "torn off" and "stripped away," yet she does not say by whom. Her qualms about her medical diagnosis and treatment remain unspoken except in her journal, which functions only as a private respite, a temporary relief. "Dead paper," it is not truly subversive.

Nevertheless, the narrator's language almost from the first does serve to call into question both the diagnosis of her condition and the rules established to treat it. As readers, therefore, we are not permitted wholehearted confidence in the medical assessment of the problem. It is not that we doubt the existence of her "condition," for it obviously causes genuine suffering; but we come to doubt that the diagnosis names the real problem—the narrator seems to place her own inverted commas around the words "temporary nervous depression" and "slight hysterical tendency"—and perceive that whatever its nature it is exacerbated by the rules established for its cure.

For this reason, we are alert to the possibility of an alternative vision. The yellow wallpaper provides it. Representing a different reality, it is "living paper," aggressively alive: "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream" (25). The narrator's husband refuses to replace the wallpaper, "whitewash" the room, or let her change rooms altogether on the grounds that other changes will then be demanded. The wallpaper is to remain: acknowledgment of its reality is the first step toward freedom. Confronting it at first through male eyes, the narrator is repelled and speculates that the children who inhabited the room before her attacked it for its ugliness. There is thus considerable resistance to the wallpaper and an implied rejection of what it represents, even by young children.

But the wallpaper exerts its power and, at the same time, the narrator's

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journal entries falter; "I don't know why I should write this" (21), she says, about halfway through the story. She makes a final effort to be allowed to leave the room; when this fails, she becomes increasingly absorbed by the wallpaper and by the figure of a woman that exists behind its confusing surface pattern. This figure grows clearer to her, to the point where she can join her behind the paper and literally act within it. At this point, her language becomes bolder: she completes the predicates that were earlier left passively hanging. Describing joint action with the woman in the wallpaper, she tells us that the room has come to be damaged at the hands of women: "I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper" (32); "I am getting angry enough to do something desperate" (34). From an increasingly distinctive perspective, she sees an alternative reality beneath the repellent surface pattern in which the figures of women are emerging. Her original perception is confirmed: the patriarchal house is indeed "haunted" by figures of women. The room is revealed as a prison inhabited by its former inmates, whose struggles have nearly destroyed it. Absorbed almost physically by "living paper"—writing—she strives to liberate the women trapped within the ancestral halls, women with whom she increasingly identifies. Once begun, liberation and identification are irreversible: "I've got out at last . . . " cries the narrator, "And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (36).

This ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is ambiguous and complex. Because the narrator's final proclamation is both triumphant and horrifying, madness in the story is both positive and negative. On the one hand, it testifies to an alternative reality and challenges patriarchy head on. The fact that her unflappable husband faints when he finds her establishes the dramatic power of her new freedom. Defying the judgment that she suffers from a "temporary nervous depression," she has followed her own logic, her own perceptions, her own projects to this final scene in which madness is seen as a kind of transcendent sanity. This engagement with the yellow wallpaper constitutes a form of the "work" which has been forbidden—women's writing. As she steps over the patriarchal body, she leaves the authoritative voice of diagnosis in shambles at her feet. Forsaking "women's language" forever, her new mode of speaking—an unlawful language—escapes "the sentence" imposed by patriarchy.

On the other hand, there are consequences to be paid for this escape. As the ending of the narrative, her madness will no doubt commit her to more intense medical treatment, perhaps to the dreaded Weir Mitchell of whom her husband has spoken. The surrender of patriarchy is only temporary: her husband has merely fainted, after all, not died, and will no doubt move swiftly and severely to deal with her. Her individual escape is temporary and compromised.

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But there is yet another sense in which "The Yellow Wallpaper" enacts a clash between diagnosis and women's discourse. Asked once whether the story was based on fact, Gilman replied "I had been as far as one could go and get back."[4] Gilman based the story on her own experience of depression and treatment. For her first visit to the noted neurologist S. Weir Mitchell, she prepared a detailed case history of her own illness, constructed in part from her journal entries. Mitchell was not impressed: he "only thought it proved conceit" (*The Living*, 95). He wanted obedience from patients, not information. "Wise women," he wrote elsewhere, "choose their doctors and trust them. The wisest ask the fewest questions."[5] Gilman reproduced in her journal Mitchell's prescription for her:

> Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. (Be it remarked that if I did but dress the baby it left me shaking and crying—certainly far from a healthy companionship for her, to say nothing of the effect on me.) Lie down an hour after every meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live (*The Living*, 96).

Gilman spent several months trying to follow Mitchell's prescription, a period of intense suffering for her:

> I could not read nor write nor paint nor sew nor talk nor listen to talking, nor anything. I lay on that lounge and wept all day. The tears ran down into my ears on either side. I went to bed crying, woke in the night crying, sat on the edge of the bed in the morning and cried—from sheer continuous pain (*The Living*, 121).

At last, in a "moment of clear vision," Gilman realized that for her the traditional domestic role was at least in part the cause of her distress. She left her husband and with her baby went to California to be a writer and a feminist activist. Three years later she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper." After the story was published, she sent a copy to Mitchell. If it in any way influenced his treatment of women in the future, she wrote, "I have not lived in vain" (*The Living*, 121).

There are several points to note here with respect to women's discourse. Gilman's use of her own journal to create a fictional journal which in turn becomes a published short story problematizes and calls our attention to the journal form. The terms "depression" and "hysteria" signal a non-textual as well as a textual conundrum: contemporary readers could (and some did) read the story as a realistic account of madness; for feminist readers (then and now) who bring to the text some comprehension of medical attitudes toward women in the nineteenth century, such a non-ironic reading is not possible. Lest we miss Gilman's point, her use of a real proper name in her story, Weir Mitchell's, draws explicit attention to the world outside the text.[6]

Thus "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not merely a fictional challenge to the patriarchal diagnosis of women's condition. It is also a public critique of a

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real medical treatment. Publication of the story added power and status to Gilman's words and transformed the journal form from a private to a public setting. Her published challenge to diagnosis has now been read by thousands of readers. By living to tell the tale, the woman who writes escapes the sentence that condemns her to silence.

iii. Escaping the Sentence

To call "The Yellow Wallpaper" a struggle between diagnosis and discourse is to characterize the story in terms of language. More precisely, it is to contrast the signification procedures of patriarchal medicine with discursive disruptions that call those procedures into question. A major problem in "The Yellow Wallpaper" involves the relationship of the linguistic sign to the signified, of language to "reality." Diagnosis, highlighted from the beginning by the implicit inverted commas around diagnostic phrases ("a slight hysterical tendency"), stands in the middle of an equation which translates a phenomenological perception of the human body into a finite set of signs called "symptoms"—fever, exhaustion, nervousness, pallor, and so on—which are in turn assembled to produce a "diagnosis"; this sign generates treatment, a set of prescriptions that impinge once more upon the "real" human body. Part of the power of diagnosis as a scientific process depends upon a notion of language as transparent, as *not* the issue. Rather the issue is the precision, efficiency, and plausibility with which a correct diagnostic sign is generated by a particular state of affairs that is assumed to exist in reality. In turn, the diagnostic sign is not complete until its clinical implications have been elaborated as a set of concrete therapeutic practices designed not merely to refer to but actually to change the original physical reality. Chary with its diagnostic categories (as specialized lexicons go), medicine's rich and intricate descriptive vocabulary testifies to the history of its mission: to translate the realities of the human body into human language and back again. As such, it is a perfect example of language which "reflects" reality and simultaneously "produces" it.[7]

Why is this interesting? And why is this process important in "The Yellow Wallpaper"? Medical diagnosis stands as a prime example of an authorized linguistic process (distilled, respected, high-paying) whose representational claims are strongly supported by social, cultural, and economic practices. Even more than most forms of male discourse, the diagnostic process is multiply-sanctioned.[8] "The Yellow Wallpaper" challenges both the particular "sentence" passed on the narrator and the elaborate sentencing process whose presumed representational power can sentence women to isolation, deprivation, and alienation from their own sentencing possibilities. The right to author or originate sentences is at the heart of the story and what

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the yellow wallpaper represents: a figure for women's discourse, it seeks to escape the sentence passed by medicine and patriarchy. Before looking more closely at what the story suggests about the nature of women's discourse, we need to place somewhat more precisely this notion of "the sentence."

Diagnosis is a "sentence" in that it is simultaneously a linguistic entity, a declaration or judgment, and a plan for action in the real world whose clinical consequences may spell dullness, drama, or doom for the diagnosed. Diagnosis may be, then, not merely a sentence but a death sentence. This doubling of the word "sentence" is not mere playfulness. "I sat down and began to speak," wrote Anna Kavan in *Asylum Piece*, describing the beginning of a woman's mental breakdown, "driving my sluggish tongue to frame words that seemed useless even before they were uttered." This physically exhausting process of producing sentences is generalized: "Sometimes I think that some secret court must have tried and condemned me, unheard, to this heavy sentence."[9] The word "sentence" is both sign and signified, word and act, declaration and discursive consequence. Its duality emphasizes the difficulty of an analysis which privileges purely semiotic relationships on the one hand or the representational nature of language on the other. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," the diagnosis of hysteria may be a sham: it may be socially constituted or merely individually expedient quite apart from even a conventional representational relationship. But it dictates a rearrangement of material reality nevertheless. The sentence may be unjust, inaccurate, or irrelevant, but the sentence is served anyway.[10]

The sentence is of particular importance in modern linguistics, where it has dominated inquiry for twenty-five years and for more than seventy years has been the upper cut-off point for the study of language: consideration of word sequences and meaning beyond the sentence has been typically dismissed as too untidy and speculative for linguistic science. The word "sentence" also emphasizes the technical concentration, initiated by structuralism but powerfully developed by transformational grammar, on syntax (formal grammatical structure at the sentence level). The formulaic sentence $S \rightarrow NP + VP$ which initiates the familiar tree diagram of linguistic analysis could well be said to exemplify the tyranny of syntax over the study of semantics (meaning) and pragmatics (usage). As a result, as Sally McConnell-Ginet has argued, linguistics has often failed to address those aspects of language with which women have been most concerned: on the one hand, the semantic or non-linguistic conditions underlying given grammatical structures, and on the other, the contextual circumstances in which linguistic structures are actually used.[11] One can generalize and say that signs alone are of less interest to women than are the processes of signification which link signs to semantic and pragmatic aspects of speaking. To "escape the sentence" is to move beyond the boundaries of formal syntax.

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But is it to move beyond language? In writing about language over the last fifteen years, most feminist scholars in the United States have argued that language creates as well as reflects reality and hence that feminist linguistic innovation helps foster more enlightened social conditions for women. A more conservative position holds that language merely reflects social reality and that linguistic reform is hollow unless accompanied by changes in attitudes and socio-economic conditions that also favor women's equality. Though different, particularly in their support for innovation, both positions more or less embody a view that there *is* a non-linguistic reality to which language is related in systematic ways.[12] Recent European writing challenges the transparency of such a division, arguing that at some level reality is inescapably linguistic. The account of female development within this framework emphasizes the point at which the female child comes into language (and becomes a being now called female); because she is female, she is from the first alienated from the processes of symbolic representation. Within this symbolic order, a phallocentric order, she is frozen, confined, curtailed, limited, and represented as "lack," as "other." To make a long story short, there is as yet no escaping the sentence of male-determining discourse.[13]

According to this account, "the sentence," for women, is inescapably bound up with the symbolic order. Within language, says Luce Irigaray for example, women's fate is a "death sentence."[14] Irigaray's linguistic innovations attempt to disrupt this "law of the father" and exemplify the possibilities for a female language which "has nothing to do with the syntax which we have used for centuries, namely, that constructed according to the following organization: subject, predicate, or, subject, verb, object."[15] Whatever the realities of that particular claim, at the moment there are persuasive theoretical, professional, and political reasons for feminists to pay attention to what I will now more officially call discourse, which encompasses linguistic and formalistic considerations, yet goes beyond strict formalism to include both semantics and pragmatics. It is thus concerned not merely with speech, but with the conditions of speaking. With this notion of "sentencing," I have tried to suggest a process of language production in which an individual word, speech, or text is linked to the conditions under which it was (and could have been) produced as well as to those under which it is (and could be) read and interpreted. Thus the examination of diagnosis and discourse in a text is at once a study of a set of representational practices, of mechanisms for control and opportunities for resistance, and of communicational possibilities in fiction and elsewhere.[16]

In "The Yellow Wallpaper" we see consequences of the "death sentence." Woman is represented as childlike and dysfunctional. Her complaints are wholly circular, merely confirming the already-spoken patriarchal diagnosis.

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She is constituted and defined within the patriarchal order of language and destined, like Athena in Irigaray's analysis, to repeat her father's discourse "without much understanding."[17] "Personally," she says, and "I sometimes fancy": this is acceptable language in the ancestral halls. Her attempts to engage in different, serious language—self-authored—are given up; to write in the absence of patriarchal sanction requires "having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (10) and is too exhausting. Thus the narrator speaks the law of the father in the form of a "women's language" which is prescribed by patriarchy and exacts its sentence upon her: not to author sentences of her own.

The yellow wallpaper challenges this sentence. In contrast to the orderly, evacuated patriarchal estate, the female lineage that the wallpaper represents is thick with life, expression, and suffering. Masquerading as a symptom of "madness," language animates what had been merely an irritating and distracting pattern:

> This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!
>
> There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.
>
> I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere (16).

The silly and grotesque surface pattern reflects women's conventional representation; one juxtaposition identifies "that silly and conspicuous front design" with "sister on the stairs!" (18). In the middle section of the story, where the narrator attempts to convey her belief that she is seriously ill, the husband-physician is quoted verbatim (23-25), enabling us to see the operation of male judgment at first hand. He notes an improvement in her symptoms: "You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better, I feel really much easier about you." The narrator disputes these statements: "I don't weigh a bit more, nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening when you are here, but it is worse in the morning when you are away!" His response not only pre-empts further talk of facts, it reinforces the certainty of his original diagnosis and confirms his view of her illness as non-serious: "'Bless her little heart!' said he with a big hug, 'she shall be as sick as she pleases!'" (24).

His failure to let her leave the estate initiates a new relationship to the wallpaper. She begins to see women in the pattern. Until now, we as readers have acquiesced in the fiction that the protagonist is keeping a journal, a fiction initially supported by journal-like textual references. This now becomes difficult to sustain: how can the narrator keep a journal when, as she tells us, she is sleeping, creeping, or watching the wallpaper the whole time? In her growing paranoia, would she confide in a journal she could not lock up? How did the journal get into our hands? Because we are neverthe-

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less reading this "journal," we are forced to experience a contradiction: the narrative is unfolding in an impossible form. This embeds our experience of the story in self-conscious attention to its construction. A new tone enters as she reports that she defies orders to take naps by not actually sleeping: "And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake—O no!" (26). This crowing tone announces a decisive break from the patriarchal order. She mocks her husband's diagnosis by diagnosing for herself why he "seems very queer sometimes": "It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis,—that perhaps it is the paper!" (26-27).

The wallpaper never becomes attractive. It remains indeterminate, complex, unresolved, disturbing; it continues to embody, like the form of the story we are reading, "unheard of contradictions." By now the narrator is fully engrossed by it and determined to find out its meaning. During the day—by "normal" standards—it remains "tiresome and perplexing" (28). But at night she sees a woman, or many women, shaking the pattern and trying to climb through it. Women "get through," she perceives, "and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!" (30). The death sentence imposed by patriarchy is violent and relentless. No one escapes.

The story is now at its final turning point: "I have found out another funny thing," reports the narrator, "but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much" (31). This is a break with patriarchy—and a break with us. What she has discovered, which she does not state, is that she and the woman behind the paper are the same. This is communicated syntactically by contrasting sentences: "This bedstead is fairly gnawed!" she tells us, and then: "I bit off a little piece [of the bedstead] at one corner" (34). "If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!" and "But I am securely fastened now by my well-hidden rope" (34-35). The final passages are filled with crowing, "impertinent" language: "Hurrah!" "The sly thing!" "No person touches this paper but me,—not *alive*!" (32-33). Locked in the room, she addresses her husband in a dramatically different way: "It is no use, young man, you can't open it!"

She does not make this declaration aloud. In fact, she appears to have difficulty even making herself understood and must repeat several times the instructions to her husband for finding the key to the room. At first we think she may be too mad to speak proper English. But then we realize that he simply is unable to accept a statement of fact from her, his little goose, until she has "said it so often that he had to go and see" (36). Her final triumph is her public proclamation, "I've got out at last . . . you can't put me back!" (36).

There is a dramatic shift here both in *what* is said and in *who* is speaking. Not only has a new "impertinent" self emerged, but this final voice is collective, representing the narrator, the woman behind the wallpaper, and

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women elsewhere and everywhere. The final vision itself is one of physical enslavement, not liberation: the woman, bound by a rope, circles the room like an animal in a yoke. Yet that this vision has come to exist and to be expressed changes the terms of the representational process. That the husband-physician must at last listen to a woman speaking—no matter what she says—significantly changes conditions for speaking. Though patriarchy may be only temporarily unconscious, its ancestral halls will never be precisely the same again.

We can return now to the questions raised at the outset. Language in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is oppressive to women in the particular form of a medical diagnosis, a set of linguistic signs whose representational claims are authorized by society and whose power to control women's fate, whether or not those claims are valid, is real. Representation has real, material consequences. In contrast, women's power to originate signs is monitored; and, once produced, no legitimating social apparatus is available to give those signs substance in the real world.

Linguistic innovation, then, has a dual fate. The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" initially speaks a language authorized by patriarchy, with genuine language ("work") forbidden her. But as the wallpaper comes alive she devises a different, "impertinent" language which defies patriarchal control and confounds the predictions of male judgment (diagnosis). The fact that she becomes a creative and involved language user, producing sentences which break established rules, *in and of itself* changes the terms in which women are represented in language and extends the conditions under which women will speak.

Yet language is intimately connected to material reality, despite the fact that no direct correspondence exists. The word is theory to the deed: but the deed's existence will depend upon a complicated set of material conditions. The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is not free at the end of the story because she has temporarily escaped her sentence: though she has "got out at last," her triumph is to have sharpened and articulated the nature of women's condition; she remains physically bound by a rope and locked in a room. The conditions she has diagnosed must change before she and other women will be free. Thus women's control of language is left metaphorical and evocative: the story only hints at possibilities for change. Woman is both passive and active, subject and object, sane and mad. Contradictions remain, for they are inherent in women's current "condition."

Thus to "escape the sentence" involves both linguistic innovation and change in material conditions: both change in what is said and change in the conditions of speaking. The escape of individual women may constitute a kind of linguistic self-help which has intrinsic value as a contribution to language but which functions socially and politically to isolate deviance

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rather than to introduce change. Representation is not without consequences. Thus the study of women and language must involve the study of discourse, which encompasses both form and function as well as the representational uncertainty their relationship entails. As a metaphor, the yellow wallpaper is never fully resolved: it can be described, but its meaning cannot be fixed. It remains trivial and dramatic, vivid and dowdy, compelling and repulsive: these multiple meanings run throughout the story in contrast to the one certain meaning of patriarchal diagnosis. If diagnosis is the middle of an equation that freezes material flux in a certain sign, the wallpaper is a disruptive center that chaotically fragments any attempt to fix on it a single meaning. It offers a lesson in language, whose sentence is perhaps not always destined to escape us.

NOTES

[1]Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 13. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

[2]Umberto Eco describes a "good metaphor" as one which, like a good joke, offers a shortcut through the labyrinth of limitless semiosis. "Metaphor, Dictionary, and Encyclopedia," *New Literary History*, 15 (Winter 1984), 255-71. Though there is relatively little criticism on "The Yellow Wallpaper" to date, the wallpaper seems to be a fruitful metaphor for discussions of madness, women's relationship to medicine, sexual inequality, marriage, economic dependence, and sexuality. An introduction to these issues is provided by Elaine R. Hedges in her "Afterword," *The Yellow Wallpaper*, pp. 37-63. Hedges also cites a number of nineteenth-century responses to the story. A useful though condescending discussion of the story in the light of Gilman's own life is Mary A. Hill, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Feminist's Struggle with Womanhood," *Massachusetts Review*, 21 (Fall 1980), 503-26. A Bachelardian critical reading is Mary Beth Pringle, "'La Poetique De L'Espace' in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *The French-American Review*, 3 (Winter 1978/Spring 1979), 15-22. See also Loralee MacPike, "Environment as Psychopathological Symbolism in the 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" *American Literary Realism 1870-1910*, 8 (Summer 1975), 286-88, and Beate Schopp-Schilling, "'The Yellow Wallpaper': A Rediscovered 'Realistic' Story," *American Literary Realism 1870-1910*, 8 (Summer 1975), 284-86.

[3]"Women's language" is discussed in Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1976); Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae, and Nancy Henley, eds., "Introduction," *Language, Gender and Society* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1983); Cheris Kramarae, *Women and Men Speaking* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1981); Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman, eds., *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (New York: Praeger, 1980); Mary Ritchie Key, *Male/Female Language* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1975); and Paula A. Treichler, "Verbal Subversions in Dorothy Parker: 'Trapped like a Trap in a Trap,'" *Language and Style*, 13 (Fall 1980), 46-61.

[4]Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935), p. 121. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically in the text.

[5]S. Weir Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1888), p. 48.

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[6]A feminist understanding of medical treatment of women in the nineteenth century is, however, by no means uncomplicated. An analysis frequently quoted is that by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women* (Garden City, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979). Their analysis is critiqued by Regina Morantz, "The Lady and her Physician," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, eds. Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner (New York: Harper Colophon, 1974), pp. 38-53; as well as by Ludi Jordanova, "Conceptualising Power Over Women," *Radical Science Journal*, 12 (1982), 124-28. Attention to the progressive aspects of Weir Mitchell's treatment of women is given by Morantz and by Suzanne Poirier, "The Weir Mitchell Rest Cure: Four Women who 'Took Charge,'" paper presented at the conference Women's Health: Taking Care and Taking Charge, Morgantown, West Virginia, 1982 [Author's affiliation: Humanistic Studies Program, Health Sciences Center, University of Illinois at Chicago]. See also Barbara Sicherman, "The Uses of Diagnosis: Doctors, Patients, and Neurasthenia," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 32 (January 1977), 33-54; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," rpt. in *Concepts of Health and Disease: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Arthur Caplan, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., and James J. McCartney (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1981), pp. 281-303; and Ann Douglas Wood, "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women*, pp. 1-22.

[7]The notion that diagnosis is socially constituted through doctor-patient interaction is discussed by Marianne A. Paget, "On the Work of Talk: Studies in Misunderstanding," in *The Social Organization of Doctor-Patient Communication*, eds. Sue Fisher and Alexandra Dundas Todd (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1983), pp. 55-74. See also Barbara Sicherman, "The Uses of Diagnosis."

[8]Discussions of the multiple sanctions for medicine and science include Shelley Day, "Is Obstetric Technology Depressing?" *Radical Science Journal*, 12 (1982), 17-45; Donna J. Haraway, "In the Beginning was the Word: The Genesis of Biological Theory," *Signs*, 6 (Spring 1981), 469-81; Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979); Evan Stark, "What is Medicine?" *Radical Science Journal*, 12 (1982), 46-89; and P. Wright and A. Treacher, eds., *The Problem of Medical Knowledge* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982).

[9]Anna Kavan, *Asylum Piece* (1940; rpt. New York: Michael Kesend, 1981), pp. 63, 65.

[10]Reviewing medical evidence in "The Yellow Wallpaper," Suzanne Poirier suggests that a diagnosis of "neurasthenia" would have been more precise but that in any case, given the narrator's symptoms, the treatment was inappropriate and probably harmful. "'The Yellow Wallpaper' as Medical Case History," paper presented to the Faculty Seminar in Medicine and Society, University of Illinois College of Medicine at Urbana-Champaign, April 13, 1983. On the more general point, two recent contrasting analyses are offered by Umberto Eco, "Metaphor, Dictionary, Encyclopedia," who poses a world of language resonant with purely semiotic, intertextual relationships, and John Haiman, "Dictionaries and Encyclopedias," *Lingua*, 50 (1980), 329-57, who argues for the total interrelatedness of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

[11]Sally McConnell-Ginet, "Linguistics and the Feminist Challenge," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, pp. 3-25. The linguistic formula $S \rightarrow NP + VP$ means that Sentence is rewritten as (consists of) Noun Phrase + Verb Phrase. Sentences are "generated" as tree diagrams that move downward from the abstract entity S to individual components of actual sentences. It could be said that linguistics misses the forest for the trees. But the fact that the study of women and language *has* concentrated on meaning and usage does not mean that syntax might not be relevant for feminist analysis. Potentially fruitful areas might include analysis of passive versus active voice (for example, see my "The Construction of Ambiguity in

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The Awakening: A Linguistic Analysis," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, pp. 239-57), of nominalization (a linguistic process particularly characteristic of male bureaucracies and technologies), of cases (showing underlying agency and other relationships), of negation and interrogation (two grammatical processes implicated by "women's language," Note 3), and of the relationship between deep and surface structure. Julia Penelope Stanley has addressed a number of these areas; see, for example, "Passive Motivation," *Foundations of Language*, 13 (1975), 25-39. Pronominalization, of course, has been a focus for feminist analysis for some time.

[12]See, for example, Maija Blaubergs, "An Analysis of Classic Arguments Against Changing Sexist Language," in *The Voices and Words of Women and Men*, ed. Cheris Kramarae (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1980), pp. 135-47; Francine Frank, "Women's Language in America: Myth and Reality," in *Women's Language and Style*, eds. Douglas Butturff and Edmund L. Epstein (Akron, Ohio: L&S Books, 1978), pp. 47-61; Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978); and Wendy Martyna, "The Psychology of the Generic Masculine," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, pp. 69-78. A general source is Barrie Thorne, Cheris Kramarae, and Nancy Henley, eds., *Language, Gender and Society* (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1983).

[13]See, for example, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), pp. 1-57.

[14]Luce Irigaray, "Veiled Lips," trans. Sara Speidel, *Mississippi Review*, 33 (Winter/Spring 1983), 99. See also Luce Irigaray, "Women's Exile: Interview with Luce Irigaray," trans. Couze Venn, *Ideology and Consciousness*, 1 (1977), 62-76; and Cary Nelson, "Envoys of Otherness: Difference and Continuity in Feminist Criticism," in *For Alma Mater: Theory and Practice in Feminist Scholarship*, eds. Paula A. Treichler, Cheris Kramarae, and Beth Stafford, forthcoming from University of Illinois Press.

[15]Luce Irigaray, "Women's Exile," 64.

[16]See the discussion of discourse in Meaghan Morris, "A-Mazing Grace: Notes on Mary Daly's Poetics," *Intervention*, 16 (1982), 70-92.

[17]Luce Irigaray, "Veiled Lips," 99-101. According to Irigaray's account, Apollo, "the always-already-speaking," drives away the chorus of women (the Furies) who want revenge for Clytemnestra's murder. His words convey his repulsion for the chaotic, non-hierarchical female voice: "Heave in torment, black froth erupting from your lungs"; "Never touch my halls, you have no right"; "Out you flock without a herdsman—out!" Calling for the forgetting of bloodshed, Athena, embodying the father's voice and the father's law, pronounces the patriarchal sentence on the matriarchal chorus: the women will withdraw to a subterranean cavern where they will be permitted to establish a cult, perform religious rites and sacrifices, and remain "loyal and propitious to the land." They are removed from positions of influence, their words destined to have only subterranean meaning.

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