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Source: *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 52-74

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4315866>

Accessed: 06-11-2018 21:44 UTC

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The Writing Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Anna O., and “Hysterical” Writing

Diane Price Herndl

In “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wallpaper?’” Charlotte Perkins Gilman claimed that she wrote the story in order “to save people from being driven crazy.” It also seems to have been part of what saved Gilman, herself, from a life of “being crazy.” Gilman, one of this country’s most important feminist theorists and writers, author of *Women and Economics* (1899) and the utopian novel *Herland* (1915), suffered for years from a “severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia,” a nervous disorder otherwise known as “hysteria.” Her doctor, the famous neurologist, S. Weir Mitchell, gave her the rest cure, six weeks of complete bed rest, isolation, rich food, and massage, and told her to go home, “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” and “never touch pen, brush, or pencil again.” The result of his treatment, she claimed, was a complete breakdown. Only by disobeying his orders, by starting to work again, to write, was Gilman able to cure herself of her hysteria.¹

Gilman was not the only woman who suffered from hysteria for many years before becoming an important feminist writer and crusader; Bertha Pappenheim, the co-founder and twenty-year president of the Jüdischer Frauenbund (the German Jewish Women’s League) and writer of numerous feminist works, was also a hysteric, and a famous one at that. She was the woman known to readers of Sigmund Freud’s and Josef Breuer’s *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) as “Anna O,” the woman who originated the “talking cure.” This essay is an exploration of the relation between hysteria and feminist writing. Working from the theories of feminine

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¹Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 19–20. For a more detailed description of Gilman’s illness and treatment see Jeffrey Berman, “The Unrestful Cure: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” in *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis* (New York: New York University Press, 1985), 33–59; and Suzanne Poirier, “The Weir Mitchell Rest Cure: Doctor and Patients,” *Women’s Studies* 10 (1983): 15–40.

NWSA Journal, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1988, pp. 52–74.

sexuality developed by Luce Irigaray and Michèle Montrelay, the roles of language and silence in Gilman's and Pappenheim's illnesses and "cures" are examined in order to explore the relationships between feminine sexuality, hysteria, the order of the symbolic and the role that writing played in relieving these two women of their disease.²

Hysteria can be understood as a woman's response to a system in which she is expected to remain silent, a system in which her subjectivity is continually denied, kept invisible. In becoming a writer, a woman becomes not just a subject but a subject who produces that which is visible. In making her subjectivity seen, writing ensures the woman of her status as "speaking-subject," or, more precisely, as language-using subject. In addition, woman-as-writing-subject is also a fundamental revision of metaphors. In the male-defined signifying system, the woman, who has historically been the subject of literature or the inspiration for literature, cannot be the subject-who-writes; thus, in becoming a writer, the woman comes to inhabit a different cultural position, a position which opens new possibilities to her.³ Gilman and Pappenheim illustrate how this re-vision of metaphors opened new possibilities for women at the turn of the century.

Hysteria has been of much interest to feminist scholars. Hysteria and the various treatments for it have come to represent the frightening excesses of Victorian medical practices and the ways that feminine sexuality has been repressed and manipulated in the oppression of women.⁴ Some feminist scholars have seen in hysteria the roots of

²The symbolic, the imaginary, and the real are crucial to Lacan's theories of the unconscious and are important to distinctions made in this essay. For Lacan, language exists in "the order of the symbolic," because language symbolizes real things in the world; "the symbolic" refers to the connection between signifier and signified which is always arbitrarily established. That is, there is no necessary relation between them; they are merely part of a signifying system which exists outside the subjects who use it. The subject lives within this signifying system but is not in control of it. The symbolic is the order with which and in which psychoanalysis works. Lacan calls this arbitrary system the "Law of the Father," because of its structural similarity to the establishment of paternity.

"The imaginary" is the realm of the image. Unlike symbols, whose connection to what they signify is arbitrary, images have a visible relation to the signified. The imaginary is typified, for Lacan, in the relation of the subject to the subject's mirror image: the image both is and is not the subject. The imaginary, then, is characterized by a relationship of the subject to the subject's ego in which the ego is understood as "another who is me."

"The real" is the most complex of the orders and exists only in relation to the other two. In order for there to be language, there must be an absence; the word must serve in the place of a missing object. That which is missing is the real. Lacan argues that the real exists, but that we are barred from any direct access to it because we can only approach it through language.

³Jonathon Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982), 167.

⁴See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 197–216; Ann Douglas Wood, "The Fashionable Diseases: Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*

feminism itself. Hysteria is seen as a kind of “body language” meant to express a feminist rejection of an oppressive “cultural identity” or as a means to a kind of power over others.⁵ Freud’s “Dora” has become, for some, a feminist heroine because of her resistance to the patriarchal constructions of sexuality which Freud would have imposed on her.⁶

Hysteria has come to figure a sort of rudimentary feminism and feminism a kind of articulate hysteria. In “Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism,” Dianne Hunter argues, “Hysteria is a self-repudiating form of feminine discourse in which the body signifies what social conditions make it impossible to state linguistically.”⁷ Conversely, Juliet Mitchell, in “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis,” argues that “woman’s language” is hysteria which has found a voice:

The woman novelist must be an hysteric. Hysteria is the woman’s simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. . . . I do not believe there is such a thing as female writing, a ‘woman’s voice.’ There is the hysteric’s voice which is *the woman’s masculine language* . . . *talking about feminine experience*.⁸

Hysteria, hysterical discourse, woman’s writing: these frame the question of the relation of women to language if language is understood to be “masculine,” as it is in psychoanalysis, especially in Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Jacques Lacan, language is central and determining; it is also specifically related to the shaping of gender identity. He considers it no accident that the castration complex occurs at the same time that children learn to speak. “Subjectivity,” becoming a speaking-subject, means understanding absence. For Lacan, it is the absence of the phallus; therefore, subjectivity means submitting oneself to a masculine signifying system based on phallic difference.

When writing of Freud’s hysterical analysand, “Dora,” Lacan claims, “As is true for all women . . . the problem of her condition is fundamentally that of accepting herself as an *object* of desire for the man.” Indeed,

4 (1973): 25–52; and Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

⁵See Dianne Hunter, “Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism: The Case of Anna O.,” *Feminist Studies* 9 (Fall 1983): 468 on body language and cultural identity. Smith-Rosenberg in “The Hysterical Woman,” describes the way hysteria could offer a woman some measure of power within the rigid family structures of the late nineteenth century, 108–110; Nina Auerbach argues that the hysteric always maintains power over the physician because she can refuse to be changed by his treatment. Nina Auerbach, “Magi and Maidens: The Romance of the Victorian Freud,” *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1981): 281–300.

⁶See, for example Hélène Cixous, “Portrait of Dora,” *Diacritics* 13 (Spring 1983): 2–32.

⁷Showalter, *Female Madness*, 145–164, and Hunter, *Hysteria*, 465–488, discuss the ways the label “hysteria” has been traditionally used to silence feminists. Hunter, “Hysteria,” 485.

⁸Juliet Mitchell, “Femininity, Narrative and Psychoanalysis,” in *Women: The Longest Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 289–90. Mitchell’s emphasis.

accepting herself as an “object” is a central problem for the female “subject,” and one to which Lacan returned: “There is for her [the woman] something insurmountable, something unacceptable, in the fact of being placed as an object in a symbolic order to which, at the same time, she is subjected just as much as the man.”⁹ Psychoanalysis risks defining hysteria as a normal state for women (what is true for Dora “is true for all women”), but it may also be able to explain the difficulties for women of existing in a patriarchal signifying system.

Psychoanalysis informs most of the discussions of hysteria, either as an example of the patriarchal discourse which hysteria resists or as a congenial and explanatory model for understanding oppression. Many feminists argue that psychoanalysis, itself a male-founded and male-dominated discourse, is not a suitable basis for feminist study, because it perpetuates sexual and psychological stereotypes which feminists seek to change. Other feminists argue that psychoanalysis, understood as a descriptive, not prescriptive discourse, helps to explain the workings of sexual power and sexual stereotyping. Teresa de Lauretis in *Alice Doesn't* makes one of the most coherent arguments against a feminist use of psychoanalysis; she points out that a psychoanalytic theory of the subject is always masculine.¹⁰ Because psychoanalysis bases psychological sexual difference on the perception of the apparent visible presence or absence of the phallus, Lacan and Lacanians cannot distance themselves from biological determinism; a “metaphorical” phallus which can only be understood in relation to a physical penis, she argues, is still deterministic, still grounds the subject in the masculine.¹¹ “In the psychoanalytic view of signification, subject processes are essentially phallic; . . . female sexuality is negated, assimilated to the male’s.”¹²

De Lauretis would look forward toward a theory of subjectivity which is not based on sexual difference, or at least a theory in which one sex is

⁹Jacques Lacan, “Intervention on Transference,” in *Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 68. Emphasis added. Jacques Lacan, *Seminaire II*, 304–05 quoted in Jacqueline Rose, “Introduction – II,” *Feminine Sexuality*, 45.

¹⁰Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). See also Luce Irigaray, “Any Theory of the ‘Subject’ Has Always Been Appropriated by the ‘Masculine,’” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 133–146.

¹¹Martine Aniel has proposed a way to avoid the impass over the biological determinism debate in psychoanalysis. Aniel argues that the physical penis serves only as a symbol of a “lack” that has already been experienced: “My contention is that the experience of lack antedates the discovery of sexual differences and coincides with the entry into language. The *Spaltung* [split in the subject] represents the entry into language and the first experience of division. The discovery of the sexual differences only reactivates this earlier trauma.” Martine Aniel, “A Return to the Scene of Penis Envy: A Contribution to the Psychoanalytic Theory of Female Sexuality,” *Literature and Psychology* 32, (1986): 17.

¹²de Lauretis, 23.

not defined as the negative of the other. This analysis, however, looks backward to the late nineteenth century when subjectivity *was* based in sexual difference. Subjectivity was defined as masculine, and that definition had devastating effects for women, especially for women who aspired to be “subjects” in their own right. While I disagree with de Lauretis’ claim that psychoanalysis is necessarily deterministic, our critiques are not necessarily incompatible; hers is a forward-looking attempt to shape a feminine subjectivity not defined against the masculine, while mine is a backward-looking analysis of the historical effects of masculine-defined subjectivity, effects which can still be felt today and which will be felt until we fully understand the role of language in shaping subjectivity.

In Lacanian theory, even sexual identity is imposed upon the subject within the field of language. Lacan argues that the castration complex and the entry into language, into the order of the symbolic, are concomitant. One is forced, by the nature of language, to assume one sex or the other; when one develops a vocabulary for the self, one learns either that “I am a boy” or that “I am a girl.” Sexual difference is determined by an arbitrary, perceptual referent, the apparent possession or absence of the phallus. This does not mean that “anatomical difference *is* sexual difference, . . . but that anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference”; it is the *visible representation* of sexual difference. Difference is, therefore, determined within language on the basis of a signifier, something which in itself has no meaning, but to which meaning is granted. “The phallus thus indicates the reduction of difference to an instance of visible perception, a *seeming* value.”¹³ Within this “erected,” visible system of meaning, the phallus becomes the privileged symbol, and as seeming possessor of the phallus, man assumes that privilege in the signifying system.

Lacan argues that “for all speaking subjects” sexual difference comes to “lining up” on one side or the other of the division between the sexes; it comes to choosing one signifier or another. In a system ordered by the visibility/invisibility of the sexual organ, the woman, who has “nothing to see,” is defined in terms of negativity. Luce Irigaray argues that the determination of difference in this system is less male/female than phallic/castrated, or something/nothing. “Woman’s castration is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her *having* nothing. In her having nothing penile, in seeing that she has No Thing. Nothing *like* man. . . . *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth.*” The signifier which determines, which represents female sexuality in this visible system, then, is (the) “no-thing.” Expressed differently, feminine

¹³Rose, “Introduction—II,” 42.

sexuality in a specular system is representable by nothing, is *unrepresentable*, has no representations.¹⁴

The dangers for the woman of this situation become clear when we understand that, within this system,

. . . the woman's sexuality is inseparable from the representations through which it is produced. . . . The question of what a woman is in this account always stalls on the crucial acknowledgement that there is absolutely no guarantee that she *is* at all. But if she takes up her place according to the process described, then her sexuality will betray, necessarily, the impasses of its history.¹⁵

Feminine sexuality, in a specular system, is determined as a projection by the male of that which he is not—castrated, lacking—in order to guarantee his own wholeness. Lacan argues that because there is no positive definition or representation of femininity (it is defined only as the negative of the man), it is constituted as “lack.” Since it is not actually lacking, femininity as lack can only be assumed as a masquerade, as a mime, of this negativity.¹⁶

Luce Irigaray and Michèle Montrelay (who were trained by Lacan, and who have continued their own work on the question of femininity, revising and rejecting his work to differing degrees) see the “impasses” in the history of the formation of feminine sexuality as at the root of many feminine neuroses, particularly of hysteria. Irigaray and Montrelay use different methods to approach this question, but they begin in the same place and reach much the same answer. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray “speculates” that to have sexual organs which are not visible—to be a woman—when one exists in a signifying system erected on the principle of visibility, means to be thought to have “No Thing.” Michèle Montrelay, in “Of Femininity,” argues that women have less repression than censorship of their sexuality, which results in “gaps” in their unconscious representations. Both theorists conclude that the problem for the woman in a masculine-dominated, specular signifying system is a lack of representations. She is either represented by No Thing or she has no representation.

¹⁴Rose, “Introduction—II,” 42. Luce Irigaray, “The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry,” in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 48. Simply defined, a “specular system” is a system based on visibility; it is often used in psychoanalytic discourse because specular also refers to the view which can only be obtained by use of a mirror and is therefore particularly significant in a Lacanian system in which identity is established during the “mirror phase.” For feminist theory, it is also connected to feminine sexuality because of its linguistic connection to “speculum” and to “spectacle.”

¹⁵Rose, “Introduction—II,” 43.

¹⁶Lacan borrowed the notion of assuming femininity as a masquerade from the work of Joan Riviere in “Womanliness as Masquerade,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13. It does seem a possibility that the “normal” woman has no better representations than the hysteric but simply never faces a moment of interpretive crisis.

Both Irigaray and Montrelay begin as Lacan had, with Freud's writings on feminine sexuality. Freud maintained, in "On Femininity" (and elsewhere), that the little girl sees her clitoris as a sort of inferior penis which she believes will eventually grow. The "castration complex" for her, then, is in learning to accept that this will not happen. Unlike the boy's fear of castration brought on by the sight of the female genitals, hers is never immediate, nor is it violent (she has "nothing" to lose); it is, in fact, structured by deferral and passivity (she simply waits for it to grow, for something to happen to her). Since she lacks the boy's fear of reprisal, Freud argued, she never fully develops a super-ego (the law of the Father, which Lacan, Irigaray, and Montrelay later associate with language) and may never come to fully accept her "castrated" state.

Irigaray claims that within the Freudian system this waiting for something to change means not simply that the girl may never come to accept the "fact" of her castrated state, but that she also will never develop any language for or representations of it:

The little girl does not submit to the "facts" easily, she keeps waiting for "it to grow," and "believes in that possibility for improbably long years." Which means that no attempt will be made by the little girl—nor by the mother? nor by the woman?—to find symbols for the state of "this nothing to be seen," to defend its goals, or to lay claim to its rewards. *Here again no economy would be possible whereby sexual reality can be represented by/for woman.*¹⁷

Without any self-representations, Irigaray argues, the girl must "act like" that which is considered feminine by the male, which for Irigaray is not just the Lacanian "lack," but is the "No Thing." "She functions as a *hole* . . . in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes." As the one who imitates representations, but does not develop her own, she will never have full access to representation as such.

But this fault, this deficiency, this "hole," inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images, or representations by which to represent herself. It is not that she lacks some "master signifier" or that none is imposed upon her, but rather that access to a signifying economy, to the coining of signifiers is difficult or even impossible for her because she remains an outsider, herself [a] subject to their norms. She borrows signifiers but cannot make her mark, or re-mark upon them. Which surely keeps her deficient, empty, lacking . . .¹⁸

Irigaray argues that hysteria is marked by the retreat from the signifying system (language) in which the woman feels her sexuality, and her very being, threatened. The choice the woman faces, Irigaray explains, is between "censoring her instincts" which tell her she is not lacking, or

¹⁷Irigaray, "Blind Spot," 49. Irigaray's italics. Irigaray quotes material from Freud's "On Femininity."

¹⁸Irigaray, "Blind Spot," 71. Irigaray's italics.

“treating them as, converting them to, hysteria.” “So her instincts are, in a way, in abeyance, in limbo, in vacuo . . . *Hysteria is all she has left.*”¹⁹

Irigaray argues that because the signifying economy is controlled by the masculine signifier, the woman’s complete entry into discourse as a “subject” is always blocked because the woman who enters into this economy as a subject must recognize herself as an object within it: “Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse—by being ‘female.’ Re-objectivizing her own self whenever she claims to identify herself ‘as’ masculine subject. A ‘subject’ that would re-search itself as lost (maternal-feminine) ‘object?’” Within a masculine system, which “connotes her as castrated,” the woman is seen “especially as castrated of words.” Irigaray claims that this “lack of words” leads woman to hysteria. “But what if the ‘object’ started to speak? Which also means beginning to ‘see,’ etc. What disaggregation of the subject would that entail?”²⁰

Michèle Montrelay, whose work is more clinical and less poetic than Irigaray’s, offers an answer to this question. She claims that when the “subject” accepts her position as “object,” there is a collapse of her signifying system, a failure of language. She argues that the unconscious needs the signifying system to provide distance from the immediacy of the body, the immediacy of anguish. As does Lacan, Montrelay argues that this signifying system comes about coincident with the castration complex. The representation which distances is, first, “the unconscious representation of castration” but, more importantly, it functions as “a castrating representation” which allows the subject to deal with the fear of violence inherent in the castration-complex. The threat of violence is displaced from a direct experience of fear for the body to a verbal representation of the violence. As “pure cathexis in the word as such” unconscious representation invests in the signifier rather than the signified; “it no longer refers to anything but the words which constitute it . . . it no longer refers to anything other than its form.” As such, “the unconscious representation is only a text. But the text produces effects.” It functions as discourse, and “discourse makes impossible any direct and peaceable relation to the body.”²¹ Our entry into the field of language, of the signifier, bars direct access to the signified as such.

It is by granting this distance from the body that language allows us subjectivity. Without re-presentation, without the “eternal return of words” in the unconscious, there is nothing to separate us from the world of objects, from the “chaotic intimacy [of the body and the world] which was too present, too immediate.” By making us aware of our subjectivity, of our separateness, representation provides the necessary “lack” which

¹⁹Irigaray, “Blind Spot,” 71.

²⁰Irigaray, “Blind Spot,” 133; 142; 135.

²¹Michèle Montrelay, “Of Femininity,” *M/F* 1 (1978):87.

keeps us apart from the “unbearable plenitude” of a pre-linguistic unity with the world of objects, or a unity with the mother, which would preclude a sense of individuality, selfhood, or subjectivity.²²

The girl’s formation of unconscious representations will not be as clear, however, as the boy’s. Her experience of the castration-complex, since she has “nothing to lose,” is less immediate, less threatening than the boy’s. In addition, the girl is less subject to prohibitions (the onset of the Law) at this stage than the boy, because her masturbation is less observable, less visible than his. The result, Montrelay argues, will be that she is subject to censorship, which forms blanks and gaps in the unconscious, rather than repression, which forms unconscious representations. If this happens, she will have no representations to separate her from the immediate experience of her body, from the world of objects, or from unity with her object of desire, her mother. Reminding readers of the catastrophe that occurred when Oedipus achieved his desire of union with the mother, Montrelay cautions, “It is one thing to desire, another to realise this desire.”²³

The woman suffering from this lack of representation enters into an imaginary, dyadic relation with her body, Montrelay argues, in which she “enjoys her body as she would the body of another. Every occurrence of a sexual kind (puberty, erotic experiences, maternity, etc.) happens to her as if it came from an other (woman): every occurrence is the fascinating actualisation of *the* femininity of all women, but also and above all, of that of the mother.” With each occurrence that marks her femininity, the woman passively comes to occupy the position of “Woman,” the position of her mother, the primary object of her desire. Thus, in becoming “Woman,” she actually achieves her unconscious desire, imaginary unity with the mother and with the world of objects. In this imaginary state, in which she becomes the desired object, the woman has the illusion of completeness, of having no lack, of being uncastrated, which leaves her outside the law, outside of language, outside the symbolic. This is explicable (in slightly different terms than Montrelay’s) if we understand that with each passing sexual event, the woman comes more and more to accept the symbolic role of Woman, that is, as object, as Other; in having no lack, she becomes “that which is desired,” that object which is lacking, the “lack” itself. She is no longer a woman, but Woman, without subjectivity. Within that imaginary construct, as she comes to terms more with being an object and less with being a subject,

²²Montrelay, “Of Femininity,” 88; Julia Kristeva represents a school of thought which differs radically from Montrelay’s. Kristeva argues that this pre-linguistic stage, which she calls “the semiotic” is the realm of feminine, maternal language. See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

²³Montrelay, “Of Femininity,” 88.

she will experience her body as the lack itself. Montrelay shows that this may take the form of silence (a refusal of subjectivity), or of a “resounding vanity,” or as “the model of erotic, mystical, and neurotic experiences. The anorexic refusal of food is a good example of the desire to reduce and to dissolve her own flesh, to take her own body as a cipher.” She claims that this “masquerade” of femininity “takes shape in [the] piling up of crazy things, feathers, hats and strange baroque constructions which rise up like so many silent insignias.” Such an imaginary identification with “Woman” is not femininity, but an embodiment of the (masculine) representation of femininity, a literalizing of metaphors for femininity.²⁴

Both Irigaray and Montrelay, then, conclude that the problem for the woman in a masculine signifying system, a system built on the principle of visibility, is a lack of representation for her self. She is either represented by No Thing (according to Irigaray), or she has no representation (according to Montrelay). In either case, she is excluded both by and from the order of the symbolic and regresses to a state of imaginary “oneness” with the body, from which language is impossible. Since sexuality is determined by and carries the traces of the representation through which it is formed, feminine sexuality becomes that which is not seen, that which is unrepresentable in the specular signifying economy. And as the one who is designated by that signifier, who assumes the negative position, who is defined by lack or by no-thing, defined by/as absence itself, it is the woman who is not seen, who cannot by any means make herself seen, or even see herself, except through regression to an impossible imaginary sense of self-presence.

Strangely enough, despite this dangerous system, most women manage to accept the dual role of subject/object within the symbolic. As is often true of psychoanalytic theory, it is much clearer why some become ill than why the majority do not. Somehow, for the “normal” woman, this lack of representations never comes to much of a crisis. Femininity is assumed as something of a masquerade within the symbolic system; the “normal” woman takes up her place without embodying it. She develops some sort of useful unconscious representation of castration, but it remains marked by its formation and retains a somewhat provisional nature; the woman’s relationship to the symbolic is therefore always less secure than the man’s because it is his system. The hysteric is the woman who has no unconscious representation of her sexuality, and who therefore experiences the no-thing directly, without the mediation of language. Without the possibility of re-presentation, she experiences absence as if it were present, continually. She lacks the structural, linguistic framework for ordering experience, so she experiences the

²⁴Montrelay, “Of Femininity,” 91, 92, 93. One thinks here of Marilyn Monroe, who “put on” her public persona along with her make-up and clothing.

anxiety, the too-muchness of experience, directly in her body. This helps to explain the repeated theme of language disturbances in hysteria—Anna O. “loses” German altogether and the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” gets “quieter” as she gets sicker—and may illuminate the theme of “silence” developed in many women’s writings. As Susan Griffin puts it in *Pornography and Silence*, “Wordlessly, even as a small girl, she begins to try to mold herself to fit society’s image of what a woman ought to be. And that part of her which contradicts this pornographic image of womanhood is cast back into silence.” Because the hysteric lacks the spatial-temporal distance gained from the framework of language, she experiences the world as if it were continually present to her. As Breuer and Freud put it, “Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.” In asserting what should be done for the woman who lacks this framework, Irigaray and Montrelay disagree, but interestingly, they each argue that it is through the linguistic framework that the cure can be effected.²⁵

Montrelay argues that the hysteric can be cured by supplying her with representations. She argues that the analyst does not make “sexuality more conscious” but, simply through articulating sexuality, provides unconscious structures for the woman who has none. As Mary Jacobus puts it, “The hysteric takes metaphor literally . . . The analyst’s task is to . . . [supply] the explanatory text which translates . . . body language into metaphor.” The analyst’s task is to provide the analysand with a discourse in which, according to Montrelay, the “words are *other*: . . . different. As such, it is a metaphor, not a mirror, of the patient’s discourse. And precisely, metaphor is capable of engendering pleasure.” Metaphor is what the hysteric did not develop through the castration-complex—an investment in the signifier as such, displacing the signified; that which frees the signifier from any absolute connection to the signified. Metaphor is the “pure cathexis in the word as such” which, by substitution for the signified, separates the subject from the immediacy of anxiety. It is “the measure of the empty ‘space’ induced by repression. The metaphor, by posing itself as that which is not spoken, hollows out and designates this space.” Montrelay argues that it is this space, this investment in the signifier, which gives the hysteric the symbolic framework for distancing herself from her imaginary relation to the body.²⁶

²⁵Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge Against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 202. See also Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1979). Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, vol. 2, *Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 7.

²⁶Mary Jacobus, “Anna (Wh)O’s *Absences*: Readings in Hysteria,” in *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 217. Montrelay, “Of Femininity” 96. Elsewhere, Montrelay writes, “In the cure [of the hysteric], the analyst actualizes that limit [between the imaginary, the symbolic and the real]. He takes the place of the bar [between signifier and

Irigaray, by contrast, argues that the woman can never fully enter the symbolic since it is built on a system which excludes her from the outset. She envisions a new system, one governed by different rules, distrustful of representations. Unlike Montrelay who would provide new metaphors to structure her discourse, Irigaray would posit a listener who would allow feminine discourse to proceed by its own “logic,” a logic that she describes in terms that invoke the idea of metonymy, a rhetorical figure which works by contiguity instead of substitution:

. . . [in] her language . . . “she” goes off in all directions . . . In her statements—at least when she dares to speak out—woman retouches herself constantly . . . at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized. . . . her statements are never identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is one of *contiguity*.²⁷

Irigaray argues that the woman’s “cure” is to allow her to speak her own discourse, one that, analogous to her body (but, as Carolyn Burke argues, not determined by it), is not structured by similarity, but by difference, not ordered by substitution, but by contiguity.²⁸

The disagreement between Montrelay and Irigaray, then, is centered on a difference of emphasis on metaphor, on the one hand, and metonymy, on the other. It will be useful to an understanding of the symbolic to recall here that Lacan argued that it was precisely these two linguistic figures which structured the unconscious. Lacan saw the interaction of metaphor and metonymy, substitution and contiguity, as determining the symbolic. In “The Signification of the Phallus,” he writes,

It is a question of rediscovering in the laws that govern that other scene, which Freud, on the subject of dreams, designates as being that of the unconscious, the effects that are discovered at the level of the chain of materially unstable elements that constitute language: effects determined by the double play of combination and substitution in the signifier, according to the two aspects that generate the signified, metonymy and metaphor; determining effects for the institution of the subject.²⁹

It is perhaps in emphasizing only one figure that both Irigaray’s and Montrelay’s theories are restricted. Without new combinations and new relations, Montrelay’s “new metaphors” will not fundamentally change

signified].” Michèle Montrelay, *L’Ombre et le Nom* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1977), 39. My translation.

²⁷Luce Irigaray, “This Sex Which Is Not One,” in *New French Feminisms*, eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 103.

²⁸Carolyn Burke, “Irigaray Through the Looking Glass,” *Feminist Studies* 7 (Summer 1981): 288–306.

²⁹Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977), 285.

the woman's position, and without new associations and similarities, Irigaray's "contiguities" will not change woman's representation as "nothing." If we recast this distinction in terms of a "talking cure" (or a "writing cure") in which the patient reconstructs narratives of her life, we will see that in Montrelay's system, she can change her "characterization," but not her "narrative," and in Irigaray's she can create different "narratives," but only for the same "characters."

A cure that encompassed both Irigaray's and Montrelay's conceptions of restructuring the hysteric's discourse, then, would focus on shifting not only the woman's representations of sexuality and femininity (from "nothing" to "something") but would also work on changing the context in which she used language. Such a cure would provide someone who would listen to her, and it would allow for shifting the rules of contiguity and combination, so that she could alter syntagmatic, narrative rules. Such shifts need not necessarily be dramatic ones; her new language structures may not necessarily be structurally different from those from which she was originally excluded. Indeed, any radical restructuring of discourse would be likely to leave her as excluded from "normal" discourse as her hysteria did. Her new linguistic structures would, however, be full (i.e., both complete and filled). What is central to such a cure is that she develop a symbolic structure through which she can represent her "self," her subjectivity, to allow her to order memories and experiences to achieve some distance from them. What we see in the "talking cure" as it originated with "Anna O." is precisely this at work.³⁰

The case of "Fräulein Anna O." is the first case history in Breuer's and Freud's *Studies in Hysteria*. Anna O., the fictional name Josef Breuer gave to Bertha Pappenheim, was the hysteric who originated and named the "talking cure." She was an extremely bright, energetic, attractive young Jewish woman of Vienna who had been denied a higher education and who had taken over duties as a nurse for her dying father when she began to develop severe hysterical symptoms. She experienced anorexia, a cough which resembled her father's, paralysis, headaches, somnambulism, intermittent deafness, disturbances of vision, extreme disturbances of speech which were marked by an inability to speak her native

³⁰The difference between the talking cure and the writing cure will become apparent later in this paper; for the moment, I will beg the question of whether the psychoanalytic discourse or the "talking cure" and writing are different operations. For the present, I will point out that what Anna "talked" were narratives and stories, which did not have the appearance of the "inner speech" one usually distinguishes from "writing." The narratives and stories were, rather, re-presentations of previously experienced dreams, visions, and hallucinations. On the same topic, Barbara Johnson asks of writing and the psychoanalytic discourse, "Is it not equally possible to regard what Lacan calls 'full speech' as being *full* of precisely what Derrida calls *writing*?" Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 473n.

German with a simultaneous, overnight fluency in English, French and Italian (which she had known previously, but not fluently) and eventually, total aphasia (an inability to use words).

In the later stages of her illness, she lived each day in three distinct phases. In the first phase, she would suffer tremendously from hallucinations and dreams during which she was either aphasic or noncommunicative and violently hostile. During the second phase, she entered a state of self-induced hypnosis in which she would narrate the details of her hallucinations, in the form of stories, to Dr. Breuer (but not to anyone else); these stories, which “were always sad and some of them very charming,” had as their theme “a girl anxiously sitting by a sick-bed” and became increasingly tragic until they “ceased to have the character of more or less freely-created poetical compositions and changed into a string of frightful and terrifying hallucinations.” In the third stage, which existed only if she had been able to relate her dreams to Breuer, she was “calm and cheerful. She would sit down to work and write or draw.”³¹ After she had been moved out of her house to the country against her will, she began to live each day as if it belonged in two distinct time periods; in the morning, she was aware of the current year and lived in the present; in the afternoon, she re-experienced, day by day, events of the previous year, the year in which the disease had become acute (this was verified by a diary her mother had kept the year before). On these afternoons, she narrated to Breuer each of the events which had brought on an attack of an hysterical symptom. For example, she remembered feeling horrified at a woman allowing her little dog to drink from a glass, but not saying anything about it; afterwards, she was completely unable to speak. Through telling Breuer of the events which had been the causes of her symptoms, bringing them one by one into the symbolic, she was relieved of each of them.

Anna O.’s hysteria, then, was a result of experiences which had not been repressed or re-presented but which were continually, vividly, painfully present to the patient. The origin of the illness, Breuer concluded, was in living in an intolerable situation and blocking any urge to express her aversion to it, while simultaneously feeling tremendous guilt about this aversion. Dianne Hunter argues that in this condition of being unable to speak about, or even consciously acknowledge her resentment of her position, Anna O. used her body as a signifier for her unhappiness, rather than using language, because “Speaking coherent German meant integration into a cultural identity Bertha Pappenheim wanted to reject.”³²

Once we understand the relation of hysteria to the symbolic, though,

³¹Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, 29; 27.

³²Hunter, “Hysteria,” 467–8.

we can see that Anna O's inability to express her aversion to her position was to be expected. In a situation in which she was seen as, treated as, and accepted herself as an object—the woman as “nurse,” without a life of her own—a breakdown of the symbolic, that is, a loss or an unconscious rejection of language, is not surprising. Her hysterical language disturbances, then, were less a rejection of a “cultural identity” than an acceptance of it, of her status as an object and not a subject within the culture. Such a rejection of language and the consequent expression directly through the body is a regression to an imaginary state of union with the body, which is bound to produce hallucinations (a mark of the imaginary) and aphasia. Her cure, then, was to represent her cultural position, so that she need no longer embody it. It meant giving voice to her dissatisfaction and dis-ease, assuming her subjectivity as a speaker who had an audience.

But telling her “stories” alone, however, did not cure Anna. Constructing new narratives, coming up with other metonymic possibilities for “a girl anxiously sitting by a sick-bed,” did not relieve her of the strains caused by existing within that definition. Such stories relieved her of the immediate pain of embodying rather than re-presenting it but did nothing to fundamentally change it. Most of the stories were “sad” ones since she could not represent other possibilities for them; however, when she began to re-experience the previous, “sickening” year and to represent those events, her position began to change. From being the nurse who tended another's needs, without any expression of dissatisfaction—an object—she became the patient who is listened to, who is able to represent her feelings of anger, despair, and fear; in other words, she became a subject. It was in allowing her to speak, and in listening to her without objectifying her, that Breuer's “treatment” was successful. As Dianne Hunter points out, what Freud and Breuer “contributed . . . [to the treatment of hysteria] was the idea of listening to what hysterics had to say.”³³

In the final stages of her treatment, Anna was able to relate to Breuer the dream/hallucination which had first brought on her hysterical disorder; she had hallucinated a scene in which she was helpless to prevent a black snake from biting her patient (her father) because her arm was paralyzed. When she looked at her hand, her fingers had become little snakes with death's heads. In later stages of the disease, this hallucination intensified so that when she looked into a mirror, her hair appeared as black snakes, and on one occasion, when she looked into the mirror, “it was not herself that she saw but her father with a death's head.”³⁴ In relating her “stories” of these events to Breuer, she was able to

³³Hunter, “Hysteria,” 466.

³⁴Breuer and Freud, *Studies in Hysteria*, 38; 24; 37.

bring her hallucinations into the symbolic; they ceased to be continually present to her. She had made them different from herself by objectifying them as distinct from herself, breaking the hysterical unity with the world of objects. She no longer had to embody the “no-thing,” or death, because she could produce a representation of it, a metaphor of it.

The process of creating and relating narratives has a dual function in the case of Anna O. On the one hand, she can reject her status as object by creating representations for herself and becoming a subject. But more importantly, through this process she not only rejects an unbearable position, she also takes over a new one—a new metaphor—as herself the doctor, as her own saviour. It is significant in her case that *she* originated the “talking cure,” and that Breuer learned from her. From her new position, new metaphor, she has the ability to create new metonymies, new contiguities. In essence, with a redefined character, she has the freedom to create new narratives.

The “new narratives” that Bertha Pappenheim, Breuer’s “Anna O.,” created were, in fact, based on the new metaphor of self as doctor, as saviour. Her treatment by Breuer was not, in fact, entirely successful, although he did relieve her of many symptoms. For seven years after he broke off her treatment, Bertha Pappenheim remained ill, having relapses, visiting numerous sanatoria, and traveling. In 1890, she published a volume of short stories, *In the Rummage Store*. It was not until then, until her subjectivity was visibly represented in the world, that she fully recovered. She went on to become a prolific writer and translator; she published a translation of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* and the play *Women’s Rights* (1899); she wrote books about the white slavery trade in the Middle East and in Eastern Europe, as well as *Struggles: Six Stories* (1916) and another play *Tragic Moments* (1913) which dealt with anti-Semitism and anti-feminism.³⁵ She was a frequent contributor to the newsletter of the Jüdischer Frauenbund. Her first publications were published under the masculine pseudonym, Paul Berthold, which suggests that her “new metaphor” for self may not, at first, have been a particularly feminine one. But by 1913, she had begun to publish under her own name, perhaps an indication that she had sufficiently transformed her sense of the “feminine” to include being a writer. Eventually, she became the central figure in Germany’s Jewish

³⁵Bertha Pappenheim’s works are not available in English translation. Her works include: [Paul Berthold], *In der Trödelbude: Geschichten* (Lahr: Druck und Verlag von Moritz Shauenburg, 1890); [Paul Berthold], *Zur Judenfrage in Galizien* (Frankfurt/Main: Knauer, 1900); Bertha Pappenheim, *Tragische Momente: Drei Lebensbilder* (Frankfurt/Main: J. Kauffmann, 1913); Bertha Pappenheim, *Kämpfe: Sechs Erzählungen* (Frankfurt/Main: J. Kauffmann, 1916). Marion A. Kaplan describes Pappenheim’s career in her chapter on Pappenheim. Marion A. Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904–1938* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979), 29–57.

women's movement; she headed an orphanage which was the foundation for a forty-year career in social work, advancing the causes of children and women, especially Jewish women. In 1954, eighteen years after her death, she was honored by the German government as a "Helper of Humanity."³⁶

Her new position as feminist doctor-saviour and writer is an important one because it places her in two positions which are fundamentally different from her earlier self-definition as the patient-victim who could not use language. First, it places her in the active, subjective, role of one who effects changes, rather than the passive, objective, one of waiting for changes to happen to her; she becomes one who "cures" herself and others rather than being "cured" by another.³⁷ More importantly, it provides her with a means to sustain that subjectivity in a visible way, through writing.

As the "writer," the woman becomes not just a subject, but a subject who produces that which is visible and which will be visible even in her absence. She produces a discourse which will take her place. Writing becomes her visible representation in the world, and in the specular signifying economy, ensuring her status as subject. Writing can provide an other to "hear" her discourse, even if such another is not present; "she" can be "read." That is, she can be seen. Writing can become the Other, insofar as she inscribes herself, re-presents herself in her text. Writing separates her from the unbearable presence of experience by representing it as other, as that which is written, as the not-me. In its role as remedy, the "writing cure" presents the experience of hysteria in such a way that it is "written and simultaneously erased, metaphorized; designating itself while indicating intraworldly relations, it [is] *represented*." But writing is a poison as well as a remedy, because to cure the woman, it must kill the hysteric. Writing takes the place of the hysteric. And leaves the subject.³⁸

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" is perhaps the most famous narrative of hysteria and also one of the most famous feminist literary works. It is curious that this "hysterical" narrative should become a feminist classic, that feminists everywhere see in the narrator's breakdown a perfect example of the patriarchy's effects on women. Is

³⁶Hunter, "Hysteria," 465.

³⁷The role of feminist saviour is important in other ways, as well. Lucien Israël argues that feminism is a hysteria that has been given a social network in the outer world. Lucien Israël, *L'hystérique, le sexe et le médecin* (Paris: Masson, 1980).

³⁸Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 229. Writing, then, as Derrida suggests in "Plato's Pharmacy" is the *pharmakon* which is both remedy and poison, and that which opposes itself; thus, the entry into the Symbolic which is curative is also violent. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 61-172.

hysteria the “natural” result of existing under patriarchy? For Gilman, hysteria was the result of acceding to the demands of a patriarchal society, but it was not inevitable. A woman who allowed herself to be produced, to become an object, would be a hysteric; but one who produced herself, wrote herself, would become well.³⁹ Gilman insisted on a change of both metaphor and metonymy, both character and narrative.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is the first-person narrative, in the form of a journal, of a nameless woman who has been taken to an “ancestral hall,” “a hereditary estate,” to spend the summer while recuperating from some “nervous” condition. Since the narrator remains nameless—she neither mentions her own name, nor records anyone ever calling her by name—she seems not to experience herself as a subject but as a wife, her child’s mother, a “sick” woman, or as “a woman” in the “hereditary estate” of all women. Her husband installs her in a room at the top of the stairs that was once used as a nursery, despite the fact that she has asked to be put in another, prettier room. The nursery is covered in a hideous yellow wallpaper of a pattern she cannot make out. As she studies the pattern during her days of forced rest, it comes to look more and more like bars. Finally, she begins to see a woman behind the bars, creeping about, shaking the pattern, trying to get out. At the story’s end, the narrator rips all the paper off the wall to free the woman in the pattern, merging with that woman in the process.

While the woman maintains that she is sick, her husband, a physician, maintains that she is not. This contradiction of her experience leaves her confused; as she puts it, “If a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?” We are told that her brother, who is also a doctor, says the same thing. Even though they do not believe that she is ill, they “absolutely [forbid her] to ‘work’ until [she is] well again,” despite her disagreement: “Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?”⁴⁰ It is important to note that the “work” she has been forbidden to do is writing, so that the activity we see her involved in during much of the course of the story is the very work she has been told not to do. She is, at

³⁹Walter Benn Michaels argues that “The Yellow Wallpaper” demonstrates “something like self-generation,” and is “far from being a story about a woman driven crazy by Weir Mitchell’s refusal to allow her to produce, [rather] it is about a woman driven crazy (if she is crazy) by a commitment to production so complete that it requires her to begin by producing herself.” He argues that “the point of marking [writing] is to produce evidence that you are still the same person.” Gilman’s point in “marking” here, however, is not to prove that she is the same person, but to assert that she is a different person. Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 5–7.

⁴⁰Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 3; 3–4.

least initially, trying to somehow maintain her subjectivity despite male interdiction. Such a rebellion on her part, however, has marked consequences. She says,

I did write for a while in spite of them; but it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.⁴¹

Throughout the story there are instances in which her representations are denied by her doctor-husband, John, who imposes his representations on her. She tells John she feels something strange and ghostly in the house, and he says it is a draught and closes the window. Confessing that her “nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing,” she states, “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him.” Trying, unsuccessfully, to convince herself that he is right, she adds, “Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way! . . . Nobody would believe what an effort it is to do what little I am able. . . .”⁴²

She does, however, keep trying to tell John how she feels. In every case, he tells her she is wrong, that he knows better than she what is true for her. Still, she tries to maintain her role as speaking and desiring subject, even though John continues to treat her as a child, as *infans*, the one who does not speak, the one who is to be taken care of. She asks for a bedroom “downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty old-fashioned chintz hangings.” She wanted an adult’s room, but John insists that they take the room on the top floor which has bars across the windows, a gate across the stairway, “rings and things” in the walls, and the yellow wallpaper. It is a room which she says, “was nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium” and which recalls to us a sort of gothic torture chamber. Later, treating her like a baby, John carries her to bed, reads to her, and puts her down to sleep, calling her “his darling and his comfort and all he had.” Readers see her making a concerted effort to convince herself that she is *not* a baby: “There’s one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall-paper. . . . I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.” But later that evening, as she awakens and walks over to look more closely at the wallpaper, John calls to her, “What is it little girl? . . . Don’t go walking about like that—you’ll get cold.” She judges it a good time to try to talk to him again and tells him that she “is not gaining” and that she wants to leave. John’s response is, as we might

⁴¹Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 4.

⁴²Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 6.

expect, "Of course, if you were in any danger, I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can *see* it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know."⁴³

Despite these repeated instances reinforcing her idea that "nobody would believe" her, she continues trying to tell someone. Her writing of the journal we read is one indication of this attempt to continue representing. But when she writes at one point, "I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind," the effects of the continual repression of her entry into the symbolic start to become apparent.⁴⁴ In writing only for "dead paper," writing only *to* death, her language use becomes less governed by existence in the world outside the self and more an internal, dyadic construction. She writes to *no one*. She begins to cease functioning as a "speaking-subject" in the world. Continually denied recognition as a subject, treated as a non-speaker, as one whose representations are invalid (because the representations of an invalid?), she comes to reject the effort of maintaining this "invalid" subjectivity:

I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I *must* say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.⁴⁵

Given all these desperate and failed attempts at being "seen" or heard, it is no surprise when she begins to retreat to the dyadic, hallucinatory realm of the pre-linguistic imaginary of the *infans*. She starts seeing "absurd, unblinking eyes everywhere" in the pattern of the wallpaper. She remembers that when she was a child, she could "get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store."⁴⁶ We can see then, that when as an adult her self-vision has been disregarded, she regresses to her childhood sense that the things around her look back at her. In other words, the furnishings in her room seem to take on a threatening subjectivity of their own; they watch her, attempt to frighten her, and eventually cooperate with her. As she comes to experience herself as an object, to be watched by the eyes in the wallpaper, but maintains her (denied) belief that she is still a subject, the distinction between the two becomes meaningless for her.

So, in a last desperate attempt to be seen, or as a last devastating result of not being seen, she begins to *see* an imaginary counterpart ("another

⁴³Gilman, "Yellow Wallpaper," 11; 11–12. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴Gilman, "Yellow Wallpaper," 3.

⁴⁵Gilman, "Yellow Wallpaper," 10.

⁴⁶Gilman, "Yellow Wallpaper," 7; 7–8.

who is me”), a woman who is trapped inside the wallpaper, behind the “outer pattern” which, “at night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, . . . becomes bars!”⁴⁷ Like the narrator, this imaginary counterpart is trapped in the “hereditary estate,” locked in the nursery behind bars, forced to “creep” about trying to escape. During daylight she is much harder to see because the paper looks different: “By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still.” But at night, the narrator can see her behind the pattern, creeping about, shaking the “bars.” The anamorphic quality of the wallpaper (it can only be made out from a particular point of reference) reflects the experience of the woman in her life; she is the only one who knows what’s “really there” in the paper and her self and the only one who can “see.”⁴⁸

The narrator gradually merges with the imaginary woman, leaving the symbolic. As the woman in the wallpaper “creeps” around behind the pattern, trying to get out, the woman in the room says, “it is very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight,” adding, “I always lock the door when I creep by daylight . . . I can’t do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.”⁴⁹ The fact that she must “creep” indicates that she can no more walk about openly than can the woman in the wallpaper. It also suggests that both of them occupy the place of *infans*, since “creeping” can also mean “crawling.”⁵⁰

After trying to free her counterpart from the wallpaper, the woman finally locks herself in the room, which has been emptied of furniture for their departure. As she pulls off as much of the wallpaper as she can reach, she first imagines that the other woman helps her, but when she later says, “I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?” it is clear that the two women, the narrator and her imaginary counterpart, have merged.⁵¹ Her final merger with this double can be read a number of ways. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar read it as a final victory over John and a burst into creativity and freedom, because the narrator has been able to imagine “mirages of health and freedom.” Paula Treichler

⁴⁷Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 13.

⁴⁸This Imaginary counterpart plays essentially the same role as the “double” Freud describes in “The Uncanny.” As Freud explains, “the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego . . . [but the double] becomes the ghastly harbinger of death” once the stage of primary narcissism is past, and must ultimately be seen for what it is, that is another part of the self, or the result will be madness. Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” in *Complete Works*, vol. 17, 141. The Imaginary counterpart is especially harmful for the woman who has accepted her role as Other, because, as Lacan states, “there can be no other for the Other.” Lacan, quoted in Rose, “Introduction – II,” 50. See also Mary Jacobus’ excellent discussion of hysteria and the uncanny in narrative in “Anna (Wh)O’s Absences,” 197–274.

⁴⁹Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 16.

⁵⁰Jacobus, “Anna (Wh)O’s Absences,” discusses “creeping” at length, 236–37.

⁵¹Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 18.

asserts that, in part, the story is a celebration of “women’s language,” because the narrator’s madness is also a “transcendent sanity” which allows her to escape “‘the sentence’ imposed by patriarchy.” Treichler reads the merger with the woman in the wallpaper as a representation of a “collective” voice of “women elsewhere and everywhere.” In a very persuasive essay, Annette Kolodny argues that the narrator, “in the course of accommodating herself to [the] deprivation [of ordinary reading and writing], comes more and more to experience her self as a text which can neither get read nor recorded.” Denied the power to create her own text, the narrator begins to experience her self as text and turns to working out the pattern of the wallpaper; what she “reads” in the wallpaper is her own psyche. Kolodny argues that from the point that she sees a woman creeping behind the wallpaper, “the narrator progressively gives up the attempt to *record* her reality and instead begins to *read* it” and that what she finally deciphers there is “the symbolization of her own untenable and unacceptable reality.”⁵²

But if we read the double as an imaginary counterpart — an Other, who is still herself — posited by the woman to establish her “seeing herself,” we see that it is actually an imaginary reunion of the parts of the self; it is an imaginary recreation of the One. She does not come to an awareness or rejection of her own “untenable and unacceptable reality”; rather, she comes to an acceptance of her status in the world of objects. She does not join with other women in a collective, but becomes Woman, in the hereditary estate of all women. The result is a breakdown of her existence in the symbolic, a “breakdown” which is the final acceptance of herself as “object,” at the cost of her position as speaking subject.

Part of the difficulty of “The Yellow Wallpaper” springs from this breakdown of the symbolic. In the second half of the story, it is not clear who is writing or when. As the woman’s position as a subject becomes increasingly tenuous, it becomes impossible to sort out who or what is writing. Tenses shift back and forth between present and past (“I am securely fastened now” and “Now he’s crying” to “said I” and “I kept on creeping”⁵³); the persona shifts from the woman in the room to the woman in the wallpaper. The final scene of the tethered woman crawling around the edges of the room, creeping over her unconscious husband leaves open the question of whether we are reading a madwoman’s text, a sane woman’s post-facto description of madness, or an entirely impossible text, one that could never have been written. The narrative

⁵²Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 91. Paula Treichler, “Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” *Tulsa Studies in Women and Literature* 3 (1984): 267, 273. Annette Kolodny, “A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts,” *New Literary History* 11 (Spring 1980): 457; 458–59.

⁵³Gilman, “Yellow Wallpaper,” 18–19.

instability at the end of the story, then, is not the “communal voice” that Treichler finds, but the voice of no one, the voice of one without subjectivity. After her own self-representations are denied, the woman accepts the cultural representations of Woman, becoming thereby just another of the indecipherable furnishings in her husband’s house.

Through her representation, her “story” of a breakdown, Charlotte Perkins Gilman managed to cure herself. “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a representation of much of what Gilman experienced herself in the course of her own breakdown; but while the woman in her story does not benefit from her writing, Gilman’s writing proved to be restorative. She claims to have recovered from her nervous breakdown by writing, directly disobeying the directions of her doctor.⁵⁴ She was probably right. In writing out an alternative narrative, in writing a breakdown, rather than having one, Gilman not only made her position as subject visible, but she found that the writing could take her place. In creating a narrative of her hysterical condition, she no longer had to embody illness directly but could represent it in her text. Her story and her subsequent writings were published, and as did Bertha Pappenheim’s, these writings allowed her a re-vision of her metaphorical place. She too, became a doctor-saviour, social worker, feminist crusader, and *writer*—a visible subject in the outer world, with new metonymic possibilities open to her.

⁵⁴Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1935), 90–106.