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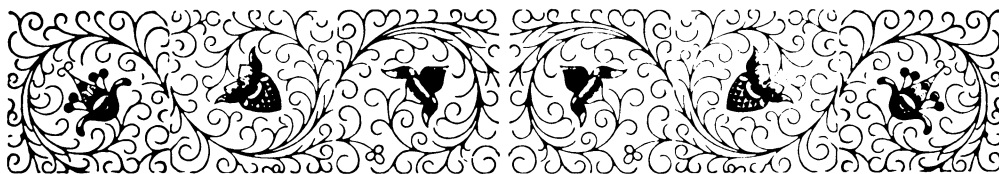
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MALE AND FEMALE MYSTERIES IN “THE YELLOW WALLPAPER”

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Charlotte Perkins Gilman.
Profile courtesy
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Almost exactly a century before Charlotte Perkins Gilman published “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the popularity of Ann Radcliffe’s romances established the genre of women’s Gothic as a staple of mass-market fiction. The perils of the Gothic heroine as she and her many imitators defined them in the 1790s were oblique reflections

of the fear and despair in real women’s lives. As a writer and a woman in the 1890s, Gilman inherited both the genre those first women Gothicists created and the sources of anger in which it had its secret roots. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the story of a Gothic heroine who becomes, as it were, a Gothic writer, Gilman both exploits and explores the conventions of the genre from a feminist perspective. The result is a bold revelation of the meanings concealed beneath women Gothicists’ preoccupation with knowledge and with a set of interrelated issues: self-defense; the encounter with a Hidden Woman; speech and silence; the misprizing of the heroine; the horrors of repetition; and the problem of freedom.

“ . . . in a foreign land—in a remote castle—surrounded by vice and violence”: Ann Radcliffe’s description of her heroine’s plight in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (329) is the classic setting of Gothic romance. Yet the most sinister aspect of the Gothicism in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is the way the Gothic situation of the heroine is initially disguised from her. She is not in a remote castle, so the nature of her imprisonment is not immediately apparent; she is not in a foreign land, so her piercing sense of estrangement from her world does not manifest itself to her directly. And the violence

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that surrounds her takes the form of the latest advances in medical knowledge about the psychological disorders of women. The masculine mysteries of this specialized “knowledge”—and the feminine mysteries they cannot accommodate—are at the center of Gilman’s brilliant re-visioning of the genre of women’s Gothic.¹ “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a story about why women have to invent mysteries—both mystery stories and mysteries of domestic science. It is about the ways those two mysteries are related to each other in the narrator’s life, and the way both are related to her sense that she herself is a mystery: to her husband and herself.

One of the major preoccupations of women’s Gothic is the difficulty of self-defense, most often in the context of immurement in a frightening place from which the heroine desires escape. “Oh that I was out of this house,” one heroine exclaims; “. . . danger and death surround me on every side” (Roche, *Clermont* 3: 42). Women’s Gothic speaks for women’s feelings of vulnerability in a world where their only power was the power of “influence.” For it is only half the story to say, as so many critics have said in various ways, that the maiden lost in Gothic space is the mind beset with its own internal dangers, lost to the order and reason of the daylight world. The other half of the story, for women writers and readers, is that in symbolic form Gothic interiors *were* the daylight world, apprehended as nightmare. Their disorder and illogic was the logic of the social order as women experienced it. Woman in these nocturnal spaces is really woman in her everyday relations, immured in her domestic prison, “surrounded by [the] vice and violence” of the social and political institutions that dominate her life.²

The opening of “The Yellow Wallpaper” plays on this relationship between the ordinary domestic world of women and the Gothic horrors that represented it, but Gilman reverses the convention. Instead of presenting women’s daylight world apprehended as nightmare, she opens her story with the picture of a nightmare world ap-

prehended as merely ordinary. The narrator, indeed, looks at an ordinary house and wishes, romantically, that it were haunted: she longs, like every Gothic reader, to be frightened. This desire for romantic escapism (a female desire, from which the narrator’s husband quickly dissociates himself) masks a desire for escape. The narrator’s talk of the “romantic felicity” a Gothic house would provide leads quickly to talk of John’s realistic skepticism—“*perhaps . . . one reason I do not get well faster*” (10). Already the narrator’s condition, which John does not believe in, has been associated with the mystery of the house, in which he does not believe either, and the narrator’s desire to escape by being frightened has been linked to the hidden anger that makes her want to escape her husband’s medical attention. The connection is reinforced when the narrator, acknowledging that thinking about her condition makes her “feel bad” (10), says, “So I will let it alone and talk about the house” (11). In a similar way, women readers of Gothic romance displaced their own secret horrors, born of their domestic situation and hidden even from themselves, onto the image of a romantic dwelling place full of hidden mysteries.

But this Gothic talk of houses was really a description of women’s suffering. Wollstonecraft, a contemporary of the early women Gothicists, attacked the civil and political inequality that kept women “immured in their families groping in the dark” (26)—a plight that assumes quite a literal form in most Gothic fiction by women. The heroine of Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance*, for example, must escape her tyrannical father’s castle by fleeing through its dark underground passageways. At the climax of the story, another flight leads her unwittingly back into this hidden world, where she discovers, alive, her long “dead” mother, for years imprisoned secretly by her husband in her own house. The mysterious noises that frightened Julia’s brother in the deserted wing at the beginning of her adventure were the sounds of their mother’s grief. Julia’s elopement from her father’s

house—her “escape” into marriage—has only led back to this same domestic prison she was fleeing, and the door through which she entered it turns out now to be locked behind her. Thus the daughter’s discovery of her mother’s hidden suffering—her initiation into the mysteries of womanhood—is identical to her own entrapment in the mother’s situation.³

“Ah, how easy it is to be unknown!—to be entombed alive!” Ellinor says in Sophia Lee’s *The Recess* (3:103). “Unknown”: the story of burial alive is not just about domestic entrapment, but about women’s forced concealment of the suffering it occasioned. And it is also about the unknown woman inside the female writer or reader, who perhaps concealed her suffering even from herself. For Julia’s confrontation with her lost mother, the unsuspected sufferer, is only one version of the discovery of the Hidden Woman,⁴ a staple of women’s Gothic that takes two different but related forms. One is the discovery (in person, through another character’s narrative, or in a first-person manuscript), of a Good Other Woman, longsuffering and angelic, whose imprisonment and/or death was unmerited. The other is the discovery of an Evil Other Woman, who got no more than she deserved and is now either dead, or sorry for her sins and about to die. The revelation of these sins usually implicates her as a bad (selfish) mother, a bad (undutiful) daughter, and/or a bad (sexual) woman. The heroine’s discovery of such Other Women is in the one case an encounter with women’s oppression—their confinement as wives, mothers, and daughters—and in the other with a related repression: the Hidden Woman confined inside those genteel writers and readers who, in the idealization of the heroine’s virtues, displace their own rebellious feelings with filial piety, their anger with patient fortitude,⁵ and their sexuality with sensibility. Both discoveries reveal complementary aspects of women’s subordination: their immurement in domestic spaces as sisters, wives, and daughters; and the immurement, inside themselves, of an angry, rebellious,

sexual Other Woman that conventional morality taught them to reject.

Both the bad Other Woman’s Sin and the good Other Woman’s Suffering must be discovered in order for the heroine to go home and be happily married. It may be that in some way the happy endings of Gothic romances that make use of the Evil Other Woman depend on the punishment and exorcism of the rebellious feelings the narrative itself expresses through its portrayal of women’s silent suffering. The heroine, in other words, can live happily ever after in a perfect marriage because (a) the sources of women’s long grievance at domestic confinement have been duly punished, but (b) anger, rebellion, passion, and filial ingratitude—which one might have thought the logical concomitants to such grievance—are shown emphatically not to belong to the wronged heroine and/or her wronged female relative, but to Somebody Else, who was ultimately sorry for them, anyway, and furthermore is dying or dead. The death of this vengeful and passionate Other Woman means that “she” is no more able to trouble the heroine’s prospects of domestic felicity.

Something of this self-directed anger, and its obvious connections to male-directed anger, comes out in the ambivalent relationship between Gilman’s narrator and the woman she “finds” in her own room. The narrator, after all, is in effect a female Gothicism, who writes her agony onto the walls of her own domestic prison and thus reveals what seems an ordinary house to be a Gothic horror. Clearly, the woman she has found is a victim who needs to be rescued (the long-imprisoned Good Other Woman), but she is also someone who destroys the heroine’s prospects of domestic tranquility by her angry and rebellious presence. The narrator tries to free her, but she is also determined that she shall not escape: “If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!” (34). In one sense this is self-directed anger; shortly thereafter we learn, to our horror, that the narrator has in fact used the rope to bind *herself*. In another sense, her

self-bondage is a desperate impulse to keep hold of—to possess fully—a new-found, elusive other self who is angry, and has a right to be.

This overt representation of the way the narrator's masochism is linked to her need for self-knowledge and self-possession is rare, perhaps unique, in the history of women's Gothic, and it shows to what extent Gilman herself saw beneath many of the surface trappings of the genre. Women's experience of the illegitimate exercise of male authority as Gothic romance portrays it is often read as an expression of masochistic desire, especially sexual desire. Such interpretations depend on a reading of the villain as secretly the hero, to whom the heroine (or, more accurately, the writer), is secretly attracted and for whose domination she longs. The glaring inadequacies of most such readings are obvious—not only that they blame the victims of sexual oppression, but that in their haste to do so they ignore the most basic subject of Gothic plots: women who just can't seem to get out of the house. The primary function of the Gothic pursuit in women's romances should be all too obvious. The threatening male portrays "a woman's projected fears and sense of actual victimization; the pursuit justifies adventure and escape, which contrast dramatically with her . . . everyday domestic experience; and the moral victory of the heroine over the pursuer reflects a desired, but repressed emancipation from actual oppressors" (Roberts 47). Whatever masochistic desire speaks through women's Gothic narratives must be put in the context of the desperate unhappiness they express at the same time. Indeed, the two are intimately related; Russ's comment on modern "Gothics" is true of their ancestors as well: "the Heroine's suffering is the principal action of the story *because it is the only action she can perform*. The Modern Gothic as a genre, is a means of enabling a conventionally feminine heroine to have adventures at all" (50).

The delight women readers experienced identifying with these "adventures," the

heroine's excruciating sufferings, allowed at the same time for a release of anger and a masochistic revelling in the cathartic acknowledgement of its existence and its sources. Masochism is a twisted version of self-defense: a form of pseudo-power, which gives the victim the illusion of willing circumstances she cannot control. It allows for an honest attribution of the physical source of those sufferings to someone else, but it mystifies their cause by deluding the victim into experiencing her passive victimization as active, self-generated desire. In women's Gothic, this dynamic operates, not at the level of the plot, in which heroines are portrayed as victims rather than masochists, but at the level of writing and reading, themselves acts of pseudo-power in which the writer or reader, by willing the heroine's suffering as the source of a pleasurable literary experience, gains the illusion of being in control of it. The deepest masochism of women's Gothic is here, in the false sense of empowerment with which it infuses its readers' and writers' identification with women's suffering. In this light, it is even more significant that "The Yellow Wallpaper" begins with the narrator's wish that her house were haunted like those in which frightened heroines suffer Gothic horrors. It is a wish, in essence, to empower herself. Already she is afraid of her husband, and already she is suffering. What she wishes for is an escape, through fantasy, into a symbolic version of her own plight: a version in which she would have a measure of distance and control.

Interpretations of the Gothic as an expression of women's masochistic desire for male domination depend on reading the villain as the secret hero rather than a threat against whom the heroine must defend herself. A further inadequacy of such readings is that they omit the actual hero from consideration as a significant character.⁶ This is a serious omission, because whatever suspicion there may be in women's Gothic that the villain is really the hero is balanced by an important complementary suspicion: the hero is really the villain. At least twice this equation is made overtly

in the form of a heroine's "mistake";⁷ most often, however, the suspicion that the hero is really the villain surfaces in the juxtapositions of the narrative sequence, in which the temporal conjunction *and then*—"at once the most unrevealing and the most suggestive of narrative links" (MacCaffrey 48)—stands in for causal or logical connections: "because," "and so," "therefore," "that is to say." This is a common procedure in allegorical romance especially, as critics of allegory have shown (e.g., MacCaffrey 47-48, Hough 135-36); more importantly in terms of the atmosphere of Gothic narrative, it is the procedure of dreams,⁸ which "reproduce *logical connection by simultaneity in time*" and represent "causation . . . by temporal sequence" (Freud 349, 351). Thus in Gothic romances two juxtaposed narratives may well be two versions of the same event, or the first may be the true cause of the emotions associated with the second.

The way Radcliffe's heroine Emily St. Aubert comes to be in the power of Montoni at the Castle of Udolpho exemplifies perfectly the narrative sequence where temporal contiguity, standing in for logical connection, identifies the hero as the villain. Emily is engaged to Valancourt, a man of sensibility and benevolence with whom it is obvious she will live happily ever after. The preparations are laid for her wedding; the plans are set, the decorations procured. But at the last minute a surprising substitution is made. Emily's deluded aunt uses the decorations for her own marriage to the sinister Montoni, and insists that Emily wear to the celebration the clothes intended for her wedding to Valancourt. Emily, her sensibilities shocked by this wedding so different from the one she was anticipating, is whisked away to the scene of a brutal, unhappy marriage in which the husband is a tyrant. This "scene" is revealed in its fullest horror at Udolpho, where, trapped in the new husband's house, Emily is subject to the advances of his men and his own attempts to wrest her inheritance away from her. Emily is planning to marry the hero, and then a mar-

riage places her in a situation of terrible sexual and economic domination. That is to say, the hero who rescues the young woman and takes her away to live happily ever after may really be the villain who captures her and takes her away to live immured in a domestic prison.

Emily's harassment by Montoni and his men, in other words, is the nightmare version of the valiant court paid her by the hero. This is the same theme Russ finds in modern Gothics: "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband." "On the day when it will be possible for woman to love not in her weakness but in her strength . . . love will become for her, as for man, a source of life and not of mortal danger," de Beauvoir said (743). In Gilman's story as in traditional women's Gothic, love is a source of mortal danger. The husband John, self-cast in the role of the hero who will rescue the narrator from the Gothic horrors of her own silly imagination—who will save her by invalidating her experience of her own inner reality—is clearly the villain; Gilman presents the equation overtly. The narrator, on the other hand, the real "writer" of this Gothic romance, begins, like so many other women Gothicists, by not recognizing the identity. Instead, she tries to find the sources, in herself, for the fact that she gets so "unreasonably angry with John sometimes" (11). And her true knowledge of the "vice and violence" he represents comes out initially only in the juxtapositions, the *and thens*, whereby the story of the wallpaper re-tells the story of her relationship with John. In these retellings, the way John's misguided cure inhibits her recovery is translated: "This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!" (16). And her reaction to John, against whom, in the other story, she is sometimes "unreasonably angry," finds its true expression: "I get positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlastingness" (16). In the daylight story, John's constricting paternalism, which robs her of responsibility for herself, is camouflaged by praise: "He is very careful and loving, and

hardly lets me stir without special direction . . . he takes all care from me . . ." (12). In the nightmare story his violence is more evident: the pattern "is torturing. . . . It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. . ." (25).

In this Gothic story, the wallpaper stands in for the nightmare version of the hero, showing that the "writer" of this tale is forced, in more ways than one, to make her story a mystery. It is a mystery to her because it expresses the self-knowledge she is not aware of; she must also make it a mystery to her husband, concealing her writing from other members of the household, who may enter her room at any minute. A major aspect of women's vulnerability as Gothiccists portray it involves precisely this situation: a woman's difficulty knowing and being known in a position that isolates her by locking her into herself, but at the same time renders her susceptible to perpetual intrusion. Gothic romance is especially a woman's genre because, in all sorts of ways, it is about the nightmare of trying to "speak 'I'" in a world where the "I" in question is uncomprehending of and incomprehensible to the dominant power structure.

That the theme of speech and silence is crucial to this Gothic story of a woman who wants to write is obvious; it has not been remarked, however, that this theme was an old staple of Gothic romance, conventional enough to have been parodied by Jane Austen. At a crucial moment in *Northanger Abbey* it seems that Catherine's friendship with the Tilneys, and her prospects of living happily ever after, are about to be destroyed. Her friends mistakenly think she has rebuffed them, and it is a heroine's duty at such times to remain proudly silent, secure in her "conscious innocence," willing to suffer the consequences of refusing to exonerate herself. Fortunately, such standards are inimical to Catherine's personality, and she rushes impulsively to explain her behavior. "Feelings rather natural than heroic possessed her; . . . instead of proudly resolving, in conscious innocence, to shew her resentment

towards him who could harbour a doubt of it, to leave to him all the trouble of seeking an explanation . . . she took to herself all the shame of misconduct, or at least of its appearance, and was only eager for an opportunity of explaining its cause" (73). Although Catherine sacrifices some coherence as well as heroic dignity in her haste to get the explanation out all at once, the result is most satisfactory. Henry Tilney believes her, and his good opinion is happily restored.

One of the favorite subjects of women Gothiccists, despite their own rhetorical excesses, was the restraint proper to female discourse. When they choose to speak, Gothic heroines can soar to rhetorical heights far beyond their enemies' range; but again and again they also choose to remain silent even if it means remaining persecuted and misunderstood. The persecuted woman's impulse to ensconce herself resentfully in the mystery the man's misunderstanding has already made of her—"to leave to him all the trouble of seeking an explanation"—is precisely the impulse behind the bizarre behavior the narrator exhibits at the end of Gilman's story, when she locks herself in and throws the key out of the window, forcing her husband to come and seek out her reasons. With the true spirit of the female Gothiccist, she confides to the reader, "I want to astonish him" (34). Her knowledge that he will indeed be astonished at the revelation of her real state of mind is related to another theme crucial to women's Gothic: the misprizing of the heroine, and the final triumphant unveiling of her true nature.

Rosetta Ballin's *The Statue Room*, the story of a heroine deprived of the kingdom to which her true status should entitle her, ends with a fantasy of such self-revelation, as the heroine Romelia removes her mask and reproves the guards who have seized her: "Off, off, ye base-born plebeians . . . behold who I am!" (2: 135). In women's Gothic, the fairy-tale story of the noblewoman whose true identity is unknown acquires a special resonance, for the difficulty of being known is the real subject of Gothic

paranoia, and the heroine's impulse to cry out, "behold who I am!" is the strongest and most stifled impulse women Gothicists portray. The atmosphere of persecution that infuses women's Gothic is produced not only by an obsessive narrative focus on attempts to lock the heroine up, separate her from the hero, take her money and property, violate her, kill her, but often by a pervasive sense that the heroine is being falsely charged with feelings and intentions she does not have. This is part of the larger motif of the mis-knowing of the heroine: the false categorizing and misnaming of her essential nature.

One of the most remarkable examples of such misprizing occurs in Regina Maria Roche's popular romance *The Children of the Abbey*, in which the whole plot turns upon misinterpretations of the heroine. Many of these interpretations result from prohibitions against her speaking up to explain or defend her strange, but innocent, conduct. The source both of Amanda's suspicious behavior and of these prohibitions is her kind and loving father, who, out of "scrupulous delicacy" (2: 73) in financial matters, forces her to desert her lover without explanation, thus causing her to appear unfaithful. As is so often the case in Gothic romance, this same story is then retold, but in a way that allows for the expression of the feelings that the first version has served to repress—another instance of the "and then" which means "that is to say." The Good Father, whose prohibition against the heroine's making her true feelings known is hard to accept but understandable and just, dies. And then the Evil Father of Amanda's lover steps in with what amounts to exactly the same prohibition, forcing her, for financial considerations of his own, to leave the hero without a word of explanation and thus causing her to appear unfaithful. The result of this remarkable patriarchal coercion is that Amanda is almost constantly throughout the book suspected by her beloved, and by his relatives, of sexual perfidy. These suspicions sorely tempt Amanda to speak up and defend herself, but she resists, with

noble fortitude, the temptation of speaking "I." As a consequence, she is consistently taken to be something she is not, and is thereby forced into a tacit form of deception.

Amanda's experience of being taken for other-than-herself is in one sense simply the experience of being Other. Not only can she not voice her own identity; by the terms in which she and the world define female virtue, her status as a good woman depends upon her willingness to refrain from disabusing the world of its false definition of her. Her dilemma is a ridiculous double bind, but it makes perfect sense in a society where woman plays the role of Other: feminine virtue in such a world consists precisely of submitting to definition by an alien patriarchy, even in the extreme case, the *reductio ad absurdum*, when that definition labels the woman as devoid of feminine virtue.

The chief misknower of the heroine in "The Yellow Wallpaper," of course, is John, the "physician of high standing" who uses his exclusively masculine knowledge as a source of power over his wife. Like Amanda's fathers, he prohibits self-expression, forbidding his wife to write down her thoughts. To her feeble attempts to speak her own reality, he responds that she does not understand these matters: "I am a doctor, dear, and I know" (23). As de Beauvoir says, "Lock the doors and close the shutters as she will . . . woman fails to find complete security in her home. It is surrounded by that masculine universe which she respects from afar, without daring to venture into it. And precisely because she is incapable of grasping it through technical skill, sound logic, and definite knowledge, she feels, like the child and the savage, that she is surrounded by dangerous mysteries" (673). It is Gilman's special insight to see that the mysteries of John's masculine cult of science are dangerous precisely because they pretend to explain, among other things, the mystery of woman. This aggressive misprizing of the narrator's inner reality at the same time locks her into a female domestic sphere

and shuts her out from the special mysteries of that masculine province outside the home, medical science. In response, the narrator attempts to affirm her own sense of herself by creating and celebrating her own mysteries. Experiencing her husband's knowledge as power, she tries to develop a different kind of knowledge in self-defense. She turns her attention to her wallpaper, determining to discover the secret of her room in order to hoard it as a knowledge peculiarly her own: "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will" (22); "I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!" (27); "I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it. . ." (31). In the process, she makes herself more and more of a mystery to the husband who doesn't want to know her, anyway, and indeed prefers for her to be as little conscious of her own mind as possible:

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit I am convinced, for you see I don't sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don't tell them I'm awake—O no! (26)

John prefers that his wife sleep as much as possible; she deceives him by only pretending, meanwhile pursuing a project she has come to see as urgently important: concentrating all her intellectual energies on her wallpaper. This absurd situation is almost a parody of the way women have been assigned, in de Beauvoir's terms, to "immanence," and of the distorted forms their frustrated impulse toward transcendence may take as a result. "The male is called upon . . . to transcend himself toward the totality of the universe and the infinity of the future; but traditional marriage does not invite woman to transcend herself with him; it confines her in immanence, shuts her up within the circle of herself" (500). The life of immanence is a life of repetition, and women are confined to repetition in special ways—because their one

major role is to continue the species (480), and because the "work" they do in their enclosed "circle of self" is itself circular. "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition . . ." (504).

Repetition in women's Gothic mimes the claustrophobic circularity of women's real lives in that it shows the heroine, who must confront the same terrors repeatedly, doing the same thing over and over. In its presentation of multiple female victims Gothic romance also shows the same thing being *done* to women over and over; it suggests the inescapable victimization of Woman in general. Emily escapes but then Blanche is trapped (*Mysteries of Udolpho*); Julia escapes but then she finds that her mother is trapped (*Sicilian Romance*); and so on, from volume to volume. The repetition in Gilman's Gothic story is the narrator's growing obsession with her wallpaper, her nightmarish task of endless and extraordinarily difficult interior decorating, her infantile creeping around and around the so-called "nursery," and the boring regimen prescribed by her doctor-husband. It is also the multiplication of women in the wallpaper, who engage in the same Sisyphusian task of trying to overcome, through repetition, the repetitious life to which they have been assigned. Gilman's subversive message is evident. In her story there is no hero to end the repetition with the traditional closure: a marriage through which the heroine transcends her earlier perils, and which cancels out the protest implicit in the preceding images of women "immured in their families groping in the dark."

Earlier women's Gothic, too, was a deeply subversive genre, but often only to the extent that it subverted itself. For, like dreams, women's Gothic offers its insights together with protection from their meaning. The heroine kills her father, but it wasn't her real father; the real father arrives to explain that the act was only justifiable self-defense; anyway, the victim isn't dead after all, so she didn't kill him (*Musgrave, Solemn Injunction*). The heroine vi-

olates decorum by eloping from a convent, but the woman who urged her to do so is really her mother, so even her act of rebellion conformed to the decorum of filial piety (Radcliffe, *The Italian*). The heroine renounces her ties to her father and declares that she will “struggle for liberty and life” (Radcliffe, *Romance of the Forest* 1: 81); but that wasn’t her father, after all; in fact, her real father was murdered by the false one against whom she rebelled. The heroine’s lover acts like the villain—but no, it was all a lie (Radcliffe, *Mysteries of Udolpho*). The heroine’s father is trying to kill her, but no—he is not her father; it was all a mistake (Radcliffe, *The Italian*).

In Roche’s *The House of Osma and Almeria* is an even more contorted example. When the heroine’s father, “the most arrogant of mankind” (1: 34), opposes her marriage, her lover kills him. She is torn between love for and revulsion toward the murderer, but the conflict is resolved when it turns out that the man the lover killed was not her father, after all. Unfortunately, her real parents are even worse than he was: the father “gaunt and ferocious,” the mother “loaded with tawdry ornaments” (3: 91). (This last may seem a minor failing, but it is presented in dire terms, presumably an adolescent fantasy of embarrassment at one’s parents’ bad taste). Their “mouldering” house, with its shattered windows, “withering grass and weeds” and “mutilated statues,” is now revealed to be both her true family dwelling and her prison. But hidden away there, it turns out, is her *real* father—the first one, after all—who is not only alive, but now completely sympathetic to her plight. No wonder the subject of Gothic romance is fear. Women Gothicists were desperately afraid of their real subject, which is anger.

Gilman saw through Gothic fear to the emotion behind it, significantly, although the narrator comes to acknowledge herself “a little afraid of John” (34), anger comes increasingly to be her dominant emotion. In this as in so many other ways, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a commentary on the hidden meanings of the century-long fe-

male literary tradition of Gothic romance that precedes it. In fact, “The Yellow Wallpaper” could almost be an allegory of the way the female Gothicist uses mystery to mediate between her anger at domestic ideology and her need to believe in it. For the narrator, a woman excluded from the mysteries of masculine knowledge (“I am a doctor dear, and I know”), compensates by making her wallpaper, symbol of her domestic confinement, into a mystery that she must devote every moment to deciphering. Her concentration on the wallpaper is at once a desperate attempt to validate the ideology that limits women’s proper sphere of knowledge to the mysteries of interior decorating, and a way for her to inscribe her own mystery—the angry and victimized Hidden Other Woman inside her—on the walls of her domestic prison. Ironically, what her husband thinks he “knows” is his wife; her increasing sense that she is the guardian of a deep secret that “nobody knows but me” (22)—a treasure of self-knowledge she must hoard with the greatest care—marks her increasing awareness that her husband’s so-called knowledge of his patient wife has mystified her even in her own eyes. It is her final triumph to force this supposed expert on feminine psychology to confront directly, and literally, the fact that her life is really a locked room to him: a room to which only the imprisoned woman herself can provide the key. At the end she assaults the male rationalist with the revelation that this house is haunted by a mystery, and that this mystery is his own wife.

This sense that the Gothic heroine is herself the real mystery whose solution she must discover and proclaim is central to Gilman’s re-visioning of the Gothic. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” she reveals her perceptions that Gothic fear is a mask for anger, that woman’s “separate sphere” is a house of horrors, and that the “mysteries” heroines try so desperately to decipher while immured in Gothic space are only a disguise for the real mystery, woman herself. She portrays this mystery as invisible to men, and their self-satisfied “knowl-

edge” of women as a form of violence against which women need to defend themselves by “speaking ‘I.’ ” But this task is almost impossible, because that false “knowledge” is itself the source of the mystery: a dangerous mystification in which woman, before she frees herself to know—and to create—her own inner reality, unwittingly colludes. “The Yellow Wallpaper” charts the breakdown of this collusion, beginning with the narrator’s desperate effort to preserve it by becoming a female Goth-icist. Choosing escapism rather than escape, she simultaneously invests her boring domestic world with the “romantic felicity” of Gothic terrors and creates her own alternative “mystery,” her own specialized branch of knowledge that can exist safely in a “separate sphere” from that of her husband. What happens, however, is that, in writing her Gothic story onto her walls, she uncovers what women’s Gothic had always tried to conceal: a Hidden Woman in the heroine, who resents the life of domestic repetition to which the “hero” would like to confine her. By forcing her husband to acknowledge and confront the mystery she has been to him, she exposes this domestic life for what it is.

The husband’s response to the Gothic vision with which the woman writer has confronted him, however, is to become unconscious—as unconscious as male readers in Gilman’s day seem to have been of the real secret she was revealing.⁹ And the narrator, crawling triumphantly over his inert form, is still defeated by that unconsciousness: still trapped in repetition, as she goes around and around the “circle of herself.”

This image is part of a disturbing system of ironies at the end of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” The narrator, forced to “read” her wallpaper passively as a substitute for writing actively, has transformed her reading into an act of imagination and thus an act of freedom. Yet this “freedom” seems to consist in creeping around and around a “nursery” in a circle. Having “got out at last,” the narrator celebrates by locking herself in and throwing the key out the

window; having rescued her alter-ego from the imprisonment of the wallpaper, she carefully ties her up so she will not escape. Perhaps most bizarre is the way in which the protagonist’s journey inward seems to have produced an unfolding self-knowledge ending in total self loss. Having at first confused her barbarous confinement in a madhouse with a genteel vacation in the country, the narrator gradually distinguished, in her room with its barred windows, “a woman” behind bars. At the end she has come to see that woman as herself, asking in a moment of shocking clarity whether all the creeping women she sees “come out of that wall-paper, as I did” (35). The phrase “as I did” acknowledges that all this time she herself has been the Other Woman, both longsuffering and rebellious, hidden in her room. Yet the flash of insight is also a moment of confusion: the narrator has everything backwards, identifying the woman in the wallpaper as herself rather than as a symbolic—and self-created—projection of her own plight outward onto her surroundings.¹⁰ She began her stay at this house by longing for the symbolic escape of a Gothic fantasy, and that is what she has found. But like most female Gothic readers and writers, she fails to translate the Gothic reality into its everyday meanings; thus her self-knowledge is somehow hidden even from herself, and her act of imagination, the symbolic discovery of her plight, can issue only in symbolic action. She tears off wallpaper, ties up an imaginary woman to keep her indoors, “creeps” around and around her “nursery”-prison. In her private universe all these are acts of freedom.

Ironically, what they symbolize most obviously is something quite different. Together these actions are an extreme and literal version of the role for which the narrator’s society has cast her as a woman: the homemaker passionately interested in her wallpaper; the mother self-confined to the nursery; the “little girl” (23) inferior, with her childlike behavior, to her wiser husband. The grim joke behind the final Gothic vision of a woman crawling around a nur-

sery like a maniac is that this apparent “insanity” is merely a literalized picture of the social norm that passes, in her society, for sanity—the conduct becoming in a respectable woman. This is Gilman’s final equation of the Gothic nightmare with women’s everyday reality. At its most pessimistic level, the story ends in a terrible vision of what happens when women are forced to seek self-knowledge in nurseries and interior decorations; it is a bitter, parodic view of what Gilman’s society intended women, including her, to be.

That Gilman resisted such stereotyping by writing a story like “The Yellow Wallpaper” casts the ending in a more hopeful light, as do a number of elements in the plot itself: the narrator’s increasing sense of self-mastery as the story goes on; her determination to “speak ‘I’ ” against her husband’s prohibition;¹¹ her final exultation in her own powers after so long a period of self-doubt; her ability to direct her anger, at the end, toward its proper object—the hero whom she finally perceives as the villain. Her excited cry, “I’ve got out at last . . . so you can’t put me back!” (36) represents a delusion only on one level; the narrator is lost in imagination, but in imagination she will continue to be free.

The final image in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is one of triumph and defeat, insight and insanity, self-knowledge and self-loss. That the story should end in a maze of ironic ambiguities as confusing as the wallpaper itself is appropriate. It is hardly surprising that Gilman’s text should generate several patterns of meaning, each of which trails off at the end into “unheard of contradictions” (13). For like the wallpaper, Gilman’s story mirrors a social system rife with the multiple contradictions that result when people struggle to fulfill their human potential in a world that denies their humanity. In such a world, an act of imagination is sometimes the only act of freedom possible. “The Yellow Wallpaper,” for all the contradictions it represents, is unambiguously such an act.

Notes

¹The term “re-visioning” is from Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision.”

²As Doody says, “It is in the Gothic novel that women writers could first accuse the ‘real world’ of falsehood and deep disorder” (560).

³See Kahane on “the spectral presence,” at the “secret center of the Gothic structure” (50), of a “dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of female identity which the heroine must confront” (47-48).

⁴Compare Russ’s discussion of the convention of the “Other Woman” in modern Gothics (33, 34, 47), and Radway on the “female foil” (149).

⁵The “favourite virtue” of the early Gothic heroines (J. M. S. Tompkins 270).

⁶However, Wolff presents a much wiser reading of both the villain and hero as projections of the heroine’s attitude toward her sexuality.

⁷See Smith, *Emmeline* 377-78, and Roche, *Clermont* 2: 6-8.

⁸As Hough points out in his discussion of allegory (135).

⁹See Hedges on contemporary, and subsequent, readers’ blindness to the “connection between the insanity and the sex, or sexual role, of the victim . . .” (41).

¹⁰Cf. Kolodny’s view that “in decoding her own projections onto the paper, the protagonist had managed merely to reencode them once more, and now more firmly than ever, within” (459), and Shumaker’s discussion of the way Gilman’s pattern of images “reveals the source of the narrator’s malady yet allows the narrator herself to remain essentially unable to verbalize her problem” (597).

¹¹On self-expression as a theme central to the story see Gilbert and Gubar (89-92) and Treichler, who reads the wallpaper itself as “a metaphor for women’s discourse” (62).

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