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Queering *The Yellow Wallpaper*? Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Politics of Form

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The title of the critical casebook in which Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* was republished by The Feminist Press in 1992 indirectly calls attention to *form* as a neglected issue in the criticism of Gilman's story.¹ Directly, this title, *The Captive Imagination*, calls up an old-fashioned (neoromantic) view of *The Yellow Wallpaper* as a literary text that stages the captivity of the human imagination—or is it only the woman's imagination?—within imprisoning social and/or literary forms. Against the trend of all the critical essays in the volume, in which the historical determinants of the woman protagonist's captivity in *The Yellow Wallpaper* are investigated, the title of the volume thus implicitly restores Gilman's story to an ahistorical realm of human experience; in this realm, the imagination is understood to be permanently at odds with the socially constructed forms that confine it. The sovereign imagination (canonically that of male genius) will rupture constraining forms, both social and literary, or bend them to its purposes; the subject imagination will, in contrast, remain captive to forms, its revolt petering out in ineffectuality or derangement. Inasmuch as *The Yellow Wallpaper* is taken to confirm this general truth, it will do so partly through its representation of the "imaginative" protagonist's captivity and partly as the self-comprehending text of a minor prose writer whose principal empowerment consists in recognizing her own limits. Hence "the captive imagination."

Such a view of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is, however, implied by nothing more than the title of the volume. The critical essays in the volume largely concern the historical determinants of the protagonist's race-class-gender predicament and the contexts of Gilman's protofeminism. Consideration of these topics—and, to anticipate, of queerness as a topic—virtually presupposes the undermining of any neoromantic discourse of the imagination, whether bound or unbound. The earlier work of Foucault, positing a long-standing reciprocity between madness and good form under the aegis of power, as well as between foredoomed subversion and containment, not only contributed strongly to this undermining but would have sufficed in

itself to open up a different perspective on *The Yellow Wallpaper*. After all, the room in which the still-naive narrator finds herself is ominously marked by a history she cannot read. Her supposition that the room in which she is confined has been some kind of schoolroom or gymnasium means that she has correctly divined its function(s) as a scene of disciplinary schooling (she later speaks of suicide as “an admirable exercise”), yet she fails to see in advance—or ever fully to recognize—the continuity between these functions of the room and its functions as the prison cell and/or asylum ward to which the *recalcitrant* pupil is destined. Despite and beyond her own revolt against the therapy to which she is subjected, the protagonist becomes the exemplary subject of power/knowledge as her “madness” progresses. The heuristic of *The Yellow Wallpaper* elicits complicity as well as opposition between the power-regime that subjects her and her imaginative “revolt.” It seems a little incongruous, then, that the eternal pathos of the captive imagination should be recalled in a post-Foucauldian critical volume—one issued, what is more, under a feminist imprint.

Its infelicity as a title notwithstanding, I will still suggest that the phrase “the captive imagination” draws attention indirectly (and salutarily) to the issue of form in connection with *The Yellow Wallpaper*. In taking up this issue, however, I wish first to restate a common distinction between plural “forms” and singular “form.” By plural “forms” I mean constructed literary, discursive, aesthetic, or behavioral codes through which social propriety is ordained and regulated. By singular “form,” in contrast, I mean the category of form as such, but then also the signifying *telos* of the term “form,” oriented towards an absolute horizon of ideal form. Plural “forms” will, in other words, designate the productive templates and ordering mechanisms of society (ones that may by their very nature incite revolt), while singular “form” will designate both a general category under which heterogeneous forms can be subsumed and an ideal projection. I take it that any discourse of “form” entails constant, fluid interaction between these singular and plural senses. The meaning of “good form” will always be unstably caught up in this fluid interaction, without fixed value, register, or definitive reference. It is of course possible to reject the entire discourse of (good) form as idealist (or ideological) and to read all historically constructed forms as manifestations of particular power/knowledge regimes; indeed, recent criticism has overwhelmingly chosen to do just that. Yet these options may too precipitately delegitimize the discourse of form. I will suggest in this paper that questions of form are compellingly posed by *The Yellow Wallpaper*, not just as any old text but as a text that has taken on peculiar salience in modern feminist criticism. I will further suggest that such questions are unexpectedly revived by queer theory, making it possible that Gilman’s

text will retain some of its salience despite the current critical shift (however complicated and partial) from feminism to queer theory.

To proceed somewhat inductively, then, good form is manifested in the conspicuous elegance of Gilman's narrative. The literary merit of Gilman's story was recognized by contemporary (male) readers and even by (male) publishers who nevertheless rejected it on account of its disturbing content.² Stylistic good form is almost exaggeratedly maintained by the fictitious author of the narrative (that is, by the female protagonist) as well as by Gilman as the "real" author. No linguistic lapse or grammatical breakdown marks the narrator's apparent descent into terminal dementia, unless her curious, incipiently vulgar use of the term "smooches," by which critics have been puzzled, counts as a betraying lapse.³ Part of *The Yellow Wallpaper's* power as well as much of its irony comes from the increasing discrepancy between normal-genteel speech codes and the aberrant "social" situations to which they refer: "To jump out of the window would be an admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try."⁴ Despite their evidently bizarre content, the sentences late in the story are no less poised, lapidary, and decorous than the early ones: "Now he's crying for an axe. It would be a shame to break down that beautiful door!" (p. 41); "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" (p. 42).

The narrator's adherence to linguistic good form corresponds to her adherence to social good form. The impersonal, neuter pronoun "one," in which, at first, the narrator fatalistically submerges herself whenever her "I" thinks flighty or rebellious thoughts, is the pronoun that designates class-marked and code-governed social personhood: "And what can one do? . . . [W]hat is one to do?" (pp. 24–25). Merely personal opinion, whim, rebellion, or transgressive desire are strongly preempted by the coercively rational understandings and prohibitions embodied in the neuter pronoun: "Personally, I disagree with their ideas. Personally, I believe that congenial work, with excitement and change, would do me good. But what is one to do?" (p. 25). Rebellion is not only doomed to be ineffectual, it would seem, but can manifest itself only as childishness, irrationality, and/or bad form.

A profound divination of this impasse on the part of the solitary narrator, as well as an extreme attempt to circumvent it, is evident in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. But although the impersonal "one" soon disappears from the narrator's speech and the subjective "I" takes over, the narrator stringently maintains the social speech codes of decorous rationality, evidently trying to appropriate them for her increasingly "insane" view of things. Admittedly, the narrator may seek refuge in madness as transcendently extreme, adult bad form. She may likewise "choose" the social space of the asylum, a

domestic version of which she constructs in double-bind complicity with her handlers. Yet her normalizing (and self-normalizing) conditioning does not break down. On the contrary, it is maintained even as, with reference to prevailing norms, her thoughts become wilder, her subjectivity more perverse, her social perceptions more paranoid, her fantasies more “improperly” violent and sexualized, and her meanings less socially anchored and regulated.⁵

Simply by maintaining stylistic composure, the narrator reveals a compelling need, unrealizable in the fictional world of the story, to align good form with *her* subjectivity, rather than to submerge the latter in the former. Since the sole putative addressee of that narrative is the reader, not anyone belonging to the social world of the fiction, the reader is placed in the position of assenting or refusing assent to the drastic revisionism—and new social compact—being pursued with such extreme politeness and aggressiveness.⁶ The cultural politics of *The Yellow Wallpaper* and its subsequent readings are bound up to a significant degree with the narrator’s continuing impulse to align good form with a “bizarre” new content or to bring the latter under the aegis of the former. Queering *The Yellow Wallpaper* would partake of this cultural politics, as did “feminizing” it.

I have put the last statement hypothetically, just as I have given an interrogative form to my essay-title (“Queering *The Yellow Wallpaper*?”), to avoid begging the question whether Gilman’s text can or should be “queered” (assuming, of course, that it has not yet been so). For one thing, more justification is to be desired than the mere fact, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has put it, that this is “the queer moment” in the “American marketplace of images.”⁷ For another thing, and despite a certain routinization of queer reading already effected in the academy, it is not clear that “queering” yet designates any precisely formulated critical procedure or particular critical outcome. Nonetheless, and largely because of the current academic entrenchment of queer interpretation (hardly an unresisted *fait accompli*, let it be said, either at present or in immediate prospect), the term “queer” and some of its cognates resonate very strongly in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. That fact alone justifies queer reconsideration of Gilman’s text. Moreover, given the peculiar critical salience of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in feminist criticism, Gilman’s text lends itself to further consideration both of the feminist-queer interface and the academic succession in which queer theory has “followed” feminism, at once absorbing its critique and rejecting whatever has been unreflectingly straight in its epistemologies.

Let us briefly recall that *The Yellow Wallpaper* was read as a work of virtually revolutionary feminism in the militant phase coinciding with its republication by The Feminist Press in 1973 and that it became almost the exemplary literary document of the intellectual movement.⁸ *The Yellow*

Wallpaper was read as revolutionary in the somewhat paradoxical sense that the oppression represented in the story is not overtly cruel, lawless, or despotic. Crucially, the oppression consists in the woman's subjection to an ostensibly caring yet abjecting regime in which male conjugal and medical authority fully coincide. The woman's predicament consists, then, in finding her subjectivity—and subjective revolt—always forestalled by a superior competent authority, whether professional or social. Barred from acquiring such competence herself, the woman as wife-patient cannot know what is best for her, and her subjective protest is preempted by an endless symptomatology of women's ailments. (The historical fact that Gilman suffered from postpartum depression has often been read into *The Yellow Wallpaper* by feminist critics who assume that the narrator is likewise afflicted, but this naming of her condition drastically reduces the story's field of implication.)

Insofar as Gilman's text became an instrument of academic change as well as a feminist proof-text, it—and even the surrogate author's "bizarre" or "insane" vision—was taken under the mantle of professional good form. Contrary to persistent legend in the academy and beyond, the narrator's now-perceived *reason-in-madness*, or oppositional *écriture féminine*, was not embraced by academic feminists in radically disruptive, counter-cultural, or extra-professional ways, but was legitimized, rationalized, and incorporated under only modestly adjusted canons of professional civility and procedural regularity. The sanity and legitimacy of the fictional husband's viewpoint in *The Yellow Wallpaper* correspondingly came into question, a perceived gap opening up between *his* maintenance of good form and a "bizarre" or "insane" content. (What madness, in other words, possesses John to separate his wife from society, abandon her to herself for long periods of time, virtually incarcerate her, subject her to the surveillance of his sister, and deny her any mental occupation? What does it mean when *he* ends up "crying for an axe?")⁹ Even when feminism's initially drastic realignment of good form with a once-aberrant content came to seem dangerously uncircumspect—that is, when *feminist* critics backed away from full identification with the narrator's experience and perspective as that of oppressed Woman¹⁰—rehabilitation of the "sane" view of the doctor-husband by no means followed. Specifically in response to *The Yellow Wallpaper's* galvanizing provocation, the husband's view has now been historically contextualized, not restored to its own justification. The immemorial pathologization of women's bodies and minds by male conjugal-medical authority has also been challenged through a broad feminist/women's initiative in which *The Yellow Wallpaper* has played its part.¹¹ A return to the *status quo ante* is barely credible politically or historically, or would have been so until recently.

To take up the question of “good form” in connection with *The Yellow Wallpaper* is thus, initially, to recognize a contest between the characters in the text to appropriate good form for their particular (gendered) content. The contest is neither “fair” nor symmetrical in the narrative insofar as the husband’s appropriation reinforces an existing social status quo, while the wife’s appropriation is necessarily more “visionary” and threateningly aberrant. In the post-1973 feminist rematch, a different balance of forces and a different outcome are of course apparent. A great deal is at stake in these contests. Although particular codes of good form may be no more immutable in the long run than is their putative content—the “good form” upheld in today’s academy is hardly the *same* good form as that upheld by Gilman or her characters—the claims of good form as well as those made upon it will hardly seem trivial or merely contingent at any given moment. A compelling social rationality and promise of real, substantial well-being are implied in these codes, the operation of which is more a matter of accepted *habitus* than of philosophical design, more a matter of what “one” intuitively does or refrains from doing than of what is justifiable in principle. What goes for good form thus understood goes for contemporary professional good form as well, constituted, as Sedgwick has tolerantly remarked, through “our somewhat archaic tangle of traditions and prerogatives.”¹² It is for good form in this sense—and for its professional, disciplinary enforcement—that academic feminism can be said to have opted, against hypothetical alternatives more radical or disruptive than the academic one (social revolution, counterculture). Something similar now applies to academic gay studies and/or queer theory: a hitherto “bizarre” or occulted content is being openly legitimized under protocols of professional good form. Yet it is in queer theory, especially as enunciated by Sedgwick, that this accommodation is also rendered questionable even as it proceeds.

Given that the maintenance of good form is necessary, at a minimum, to gain a hearing in the academy, and given that the claims of good form can be upheld beyond this minimum level (as they avowedly are by Sedgwick),¹³ queer theory nevertheless deepens the unease with which good form is embraced in the advancement of gay studies as an academic discipline. Queer theory—can it *be* theory “properly speaking”?—pursues the undoing of the limiting form-content antithesis; restlessly seeks out the excessive, extravagant, hidden, vital, or numinous even (or above all) in the domain of good form; disconcertingly juxtaposes instances of good form and bad form; brings out the paradoxical queerness of the norms under which queerness is suppressed. If these possibilities are anticipated to some degree by the feminist quest for an *écriture féminine* or by deconstruction, the specificity of queer theory consists not only in its activist,

same-sex avowal but in its pursuit of connections between sexual “deviancy” and the “queer” energies manifested in cultural production. It is instructive in this respect that texts to which Sedgwick has been drawn include ones by Jane Austen and Henry James, leading exemplars of good form against, for example, the vulgar Gothic in English and American letters.¹⁴ It is in these irreproachably circumspect exemplars that Sedgwick has “outed” the masturbating girl (to unsurprising howls of protest) and (specifically in the service of queer theory) the fisting man.¹⁵

Following Sedgwick, then, queering *The Yellow Wallpaper* or any other text would mean more than identifying a definitively homoerotic subtext or mode of repressed desire in it.¹⁶ It would at least include the continuing process of tracking the “gravity . . . the *gravitas*, the meaning, but also the *center* of gravity [as] the term ‘queer’ itself [historically] deepens and shifts.”¹⁷ Conceivably, it could prompt more widespread queer self-recognition on the part of readers, inasmuch as even straight readers would be called upon to recognize same-sex desire as repressed, not absent, in normative heterosexuality. Further, if Michael Warner is correct, a heavy investment in the text is one of the defining features of queer theory: “Almost everything that would be called queer theory is about ways in which texts—either literature or mass culture or language—shape sexuality . . . you can’t eliminate queerness, says queer theory, or screen it out.”¹⁸ What might logically follow is that “a heavy investment in the text”—that is, any intense, prolonged commitment to textual interpretation—renders or reveals as “queer” all who make that investment. Such an investment may be enough of a cultural anomaly, especially in the late twentieth century, to be queer in and of itself, while the willingness to make the investment may logically imply the existence of some equally anomalous form of desire. Yet these broader prospects neither can nor should take precedence over the narrower, more “literal” construction of queerness as same-sex desire and/or avowal. If queerness is not reducible to same-sex desire or identification, it is also not discontinuous with them. Both this continuity and irreducibility are apparent, I believe, in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for which reason above all Gilman’s text qualifies as an exemplary queer one.

As if by uncanny coincidence or anticipation, the term “queer” and such cognates as “strange” and “peculiar” (both of which have done duty as socially stigmatizing euphemisms for the homosexual) begin to circulate early on in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. While I know of no evidence to suggest that the term “queer” could be used as a pejorative colloquialism for persons or forms of behavior identified as homosexual in the 1890s—as is now fairly well known, the first OED citation for “queer” in the sense of (male) homosexual dates from 1922¹⁹—the narrator’s “queer” experience, includ-

ing her obsessive-projective-defensive relation to the wallpaper, gets implicitly connected to a scenario of repressed desire in the text. This desire might be called “lesbian,” implying an inadmissible positive orientation, but might equally be recognized as a desire constitutively repressed under what Adrienne Rich has called the regime of compulsory heterosexuality. The narrator’s disaffection from her husband and phobic relation to her child, as well as her partial transfer of affect to the “sister” Jennie—the husband’s sibling-surrogate, other woman, sister-in-law, nursing-sister, keeper—is consistent with this oppressive regime.²⁰ So is the narrator’s hermeneutic eliciting of abjected yet sexualized “woman,” first as subtext then as text of the wallpaper:²¹

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.
Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.
It is always the same shape, only very numerous.
And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that
pattern. I don’t like it a bit. I wonder—I begin to think—I wish John would
take me away from here! (pp. 32–33)

Knowledge experienced as wholly secret and unshareable; dimly apprehended “things”; an outline growing clearer every day; the “shape” of a woman yet perhaps of all women; wondering; beginning to think: such are the components of a decidedly queer experience, yet one so immediately threatening to this self-styled ordinary person (p. 24) that the repudiated husband has to be recalled as censor and heterosexual rescuer.

However “innocent” this situation may appear—and however unknowing the narrator may in fact be—it would be historically false to suppose that, in 1890, there could be no lesbian implication in sentences like “Jennie wanted to sleep with me” or “she wouldn’t mind doing it herself.” In *Idols of Perversity*, Bram Dijkstra indicates that once-idealized female friendship comes under heavy misogynist suspicion for its “hidden” lesbian content in the late nineteenth century, while a certain ability to reappropriate the misogynist trope of the mannish/man-hating lesbian is evident in fin-de siècle women’s culture.²² Even the narrator’s prissy “I don’t like it a bit” leaves open the possibility of liking it far too much, hence the need for outside male intervention. Yet without any conscious recourse, let alone political recourse, to same-sex desire or “sisterly” bonding, the narrator’s queerness is mainly doomed to manifest itself perversely, symptomatically, self-destructively.

The sister-in-law, “such a dear girl as she is” (p. 30), is preemptively viewed by the narrator as a conjugal collaborator, enforcer, and rival claimant upon the wallpaper, one whose *ipso facto* devious advances must be rebuffed:

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. (p. 39)

Closing out the solicitous Jennie as bedfellow, the narrator takes her place by becoming solicitous herself for the “poor thing” locked behind the wallpaper. She then effects a chiasitic interchange *with* that projected, imprisoned figure—“I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled”—thus at once becoming her own same-sex partner, the object of her own solicitude, and her own “liberator.”²³ Every denial or “clever” ruse on the part of the narrator thus backfires, the implications betraying themselves in an “interior” scenario of sexual bondage and same-sex object-choice. The narrator can envisage no benign sociopolitical translation (social realization) of this interior drama. If this incapacity attests to the prohibitive force of ideological “schooling” in Gilman’s time, it implies a certain tragic internalization on the part of the narrator as well, who poses, heuristically rather than rhetorically for the reader, the question: “what is one to do?”

When the narrator has stripped off much of the wallpaper with the imagined help of the “poor thing” she has freed, we hear that, on her return, the sister-in-law: “. . . laughed and said she wouldn’t mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired” (p. 39). This admission reveals that the narrator’s exclusively proprietary, self-isolating relation to the wallpaper forecloses whatever she might have shared with a “sister” who so unexpectedly (and liberatedly) *laughs*—before adding that “she wouldn’t mind doing it herself.” (Her ability to laugh stands in marked contrast to the narrator’s dread, in the immediately preceding passage, of being laughed *at* by the wallpaper.) Ironically, then, the one most profoundly in need of same-sex connection and solidarity is the one who makes it impossible for herself; perhaps she makes it impossible for the “sister” as well, to whom it is left only to regard the act as destructive. A connection is strongly posited in the narrative, however, between tabooed same-sex desire and broader “queer” subjectivity or cognition.

Both the heavy loading of “queer” (strange, peculiar) in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and its conjunction with a forestalled same-sex scenario seems, as I have already suggested, to anticipate the semantic shifts through which “queer” first becomes a pejorative colloquialism for the male homosexual and is subsequently extended to cover the entire same-sex field. No doubt *The Yellow Wallpaper* seems to anticipate partly because we can now read

back a repressed homoerotic scenario into a text formally innocent of any such thing. Yet it is also reasonable to suppose that broad cognitive and categorical shifts, already being manifested in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, may have been preconditions for the semantic shift that connected “queer” to “homosexual.” Such preconditions might have included the virtually epidemic “neuraesthesia” of turn-of-the-century America, documented by Tom Lutz in *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History*, and the pervasive, also well-documented Decadence of the late nineteenth century (in England, the moment of Wilde, Beardsley, and *The Yellow Book*). Gilman would not have had to be a conscious Decadent herself to assimilate the semiotic codes of Decadence, while many topics of *The Yellow Wallpaper*—female invalidism, female protest against enforced idleness and sexual prohibition, and masculinity-threatening female resexualization—are relatively commonplace in the fin-de-siècle culture mapped by Dijkstra. Whatever the historical case may be, however, *The Yellow Wallpaper* produces its own etiology of the queer, for which purpose the initially “naive” narrator serves as a powerful heuristic device.

The first intimation of an unlocated “queer” craving or tendency is articulated in the third sentence of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. With the light, regulative irony “one” uses to admit a foible, the narrator, a self-declared “ordinary” person says: “Still I will proudly declare that there is something queer about it” (p. 24). What is queer? About what? Here are the antecedent sentences, with which the story begins:

It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary estate, I would say a haunted house, and reach the height of romantic felicity—but that would be asking too much of fate! (p. 24)

So what is queer? About what? No clear referent for “queer” or antecedent for “it” is pinned down in these sentences. Only in the sentences succeeding the narrator’s timidly “proud” declaration does this narrowing specification seem to occur, though “it” periodically comes unmoored again throughout the story: “Else, why should it be let so cheaply?” (p. 24). This sentence establishes the house as the antecedent of “it.” The “queer” situation is then the one in which a large house, classified in rapid succession as “ancestral hall, colonial mansion, hereditary estate,” stands untenanted and has apparently done so for a long time, as we learn in the next sentence. Yet this clarification opens up the question of queerness rather than closing it off.

Is it queer only, as the narrator seems to think, that a habitation so

romantically desirable, and so cheap, should stand untenanted? Or is it queer, as we might think (now that she mentions it) for these “ordinary” people to harbor ideas above their station, aspiring to an “ancestral” or “colonial” nobility to which they have no title? Is it queer that this so determinedly ordinary person should be susceptible to the stereotypical Gothic appeal of the “ancestral hall” and “colonial mansion”? Is it already “queer” that she may be susceptible—more than she knows?—to whatever forbidden identities and sexualities, whatever unspeakable yet haunting forms of “romantic felicity,” these locales intimate to her? Or is it really *not* so queer that one conscious of herself as “ordinary”—as an anonymous social cipher—should be susceptible to precisely these (literary) fantasies of sociocultural mobility? And really *not* as queer as she supposes that others of her “ordinary” kind, perhaps more effectively schooled than she, should be aware of the economic, social, and even psychic reasons why a dysfunctionally large house stands untenanted? From the reader’s perspective this situation may well seem less queer than the narrator, functioning heuristically, supposes. Yet the narrator’s unwary solicitation of the queer propels both her and the reader willy-nilly into further, defamiliarizing confrontation with queerness.²⁴

The narrator’s initial invocation of queerness persists through a skeptical process in which banal “causes” are successively eliminated:

There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.

There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and coheirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.

That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid, but I don’t care—there is something strange about the house—I can feel it. (p. 25)

Queer, strange. Not the house but something “about” the house—pervasive, unlocated, yet material. Or “about” the narrator. Without ever being fully explained or “decoded” in the narrative, this irrepressibly queer (strange, peculiar) affect or subjectivity, of which the narrator is the story’s agent/bearer, gets attached to the yellow wallpaper. In a sense, the wallpaper thus becomes the “objective correlative” of the queer affect, though hardly in the stabilizing, aesthetic sense envisaged by T. S. Eliot, who gave currency to the phrase.²⁵

The first sentence that refers to the wallpaper shows how the wallpaper comes to stand (in) for whatever it is that produces the queer affect: “It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches . . .” (p. 26). Characteristically, the referent comes after, not before, the pronoun.

The process of attachment begins offhandedly, the wallpaper being parenthetically introduced as one item among others in the room:

It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long. (p. 26)

The attachment of queer affect to the wallpaper presents itself as an attempted violent *detachment* from it on the part of the narrator, as if the connection were a frighteningly instantaneous, overwhelming, or unsuspectedly pre-existing one. This peculiarity is partly accounted for, in historical terms, by Lutz's valuable observation in *American Nervousness* that the exasperating effect of pattern wallpaper on invalids was a medical commonplace of Gilman's time. Quoting Robert W. Edis who wrote in 1883 that "the endless multiplication and monotony of strongly-marked [wallpaper] patterns . . . [is] a source of infinite torture and annoyance in times of sickness and sleeplessness," Lutz continues: "Not only did patterned wallpapers fail all aesthetic tests, but 'they could materially add to our discomfort and nervous irritability, and after a time have ghastly and nightmarish effect on the brain.'"²⁶ Gilman thus apparently lines herself up with received (male) medical opinion in representing the highly irritating effect of the wallpaper on her invalid-protagonist; by the same token, the narrator's violent reaction to the wallpaper is not wholly bizarre or arbitrary, as it might now appear, but anticipated and "understood" in the contemporary discourse of *neuraesthesia*. (Gilman's fictionalization of this medical commonplace supports Lutz's general view that, as a writer, she is positioned within the discourse of *neuraesthesia*, to which she gives substantial credence, even when attempting an oppositional stance.)

Yet Gilman's fictional incorporation of that medical discourse does not relegate the question of good form to extra-therapeutic inconsequences, but rather brings the question of good form back into play with singular force from the inside, so to speak, of medical discourse. The narrator's outburst about the wallpaper is almost literally that: her diatribe bursts out of a parenthesis in a normal sentence and out of a realist inventory of items in the room with a negative intensity and hyperbolic energy that

overtax these studiously “ordinary” grammatical and rhetorical forms. A dangerous intensification and breakout of this kind is partly anticipated and wishfully forestalled in the medical prose that itself speaks with Gothic extravagance of wallpaper as a source of “infinite torture” and “a ghastly and nightmarish effect on the brain”; sociocultural norms, including ones of fictional realism, are clearly being defended under a supposedly caring, patient-centered, therapeutic regimen. The narrator’s outburst goes beyond codified, banal Gothic, however, to constitute the yellow wallpaper as an objective correlative enabling a queer affect to be precipitated with vertiginous horror, strangeness, unbridled intensity, and barely admissible pleasure.

The fact that the wallpaper is “committing every artistic sin”—the medical opinion thus being reaffirmed—now serves as permission to enumerate these sins glowingly rather than as a prohibition on any upsetting confrontation with them. It also enables a historic lexicon of aesthetic and art-historical denunciation to be incorporated, with visual examples, into *The Yellow Wallpaper*. These strictures powerfully summon up “perverse,” nonrealist energies, forms, and impulses of artistic production against which social and ideological norms have historically defended, not least during the fin-de-siècle period of Gilman’s writing: “flamboyant,” “dull,” “lame,” “uncertain,” “outrageous,” “unheard of,” “repellent,” “revolting,” “lurid,” “sickly,” “vicious,” “impertinen[t],” “bulbous,” “absurd,” “bloated,” “debased,” “fat[uous],” “sprawling,” “grotesque,” “lack[ing],” “defian[t],” “irritant to a normal mind,” “torturing,” “florid,” “flourish[ing],” “arabesque,” “interminable,” “endless,” “it gets in . . . my hair.” Queerness in more than one sense is strongly implied in a number of these stigmatizing epithets; so is queerness in its Germanic root-meaning of *quer* (transverse) or its Latin one of *torquere* (to twist, hence torque, torsion, distort).²⁷ Transverse orientations and violent distortions are particularly conspicuous in the wallpaper design.

When regulative principles of good form are stipulated by the narrator as art-critic, they are not only introduced in the suspect guise of hearsay but constitute the wallpaper as a veritable field of energetic, whimsical, decorative flagrancy:

I know a little of the principle of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of.

It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of “debased Romanesque” with *delirium tremens*—go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run of in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase. (p. 31)

Whatever the Albertian or Vitruvian derivation of the narrator's neoclassical principles of symmetry, their hearsay invocation is more ideological than strictly art-historical, in keeping with neoclassical ("Romanesque") mythologization of geometry as the cognitive and regulative science of universal order and all natural forms. The irregularities of the wallpaper—or are they unintelligible and uncodifiable regularities?—are experienced as unfixed "waves of optic horror," yet they have their "natural" counterpart too, not in the garden outside (itself progressively absorbed into the room as inside/outside boundaries break down in the narrator's mind) but in undulating seaweed. The sheer enumeration of these *apparent* irregularities, still ostensibly within the descriptive code of nineteenth-century domestic realism, infuses the narrator-writer's prose with an energetic brio, scathing intensity, and figurative extravagance foreign to the "ordinary" person, to "ordinary" prose.

If, then, Gilman as author is reinforcing the blandly normalizing medico-aesthetic discourse of *neuraesthesia*, she is also, in effect, reversing its intent by making it the revelatory medium of the culturally perverse, extravagant, surreal, and vital. However "torturing" the narrator may find the wallpaper, it gives her perverse access to *pleasure* as well as compulsion in writing. As she acknowledges: "I'm getting really fond of the room in spite of the wall-paper. Perhaps *because* of the wall-paper" (p. 31). As an "irritant," the wallpaper also paradoxically "provokes study" on the part of the narrator. This pleasurable torture ("No wonder the children hated it!") turns the sickroom back into the classroom she has hitherto only imagined. In it, the narrator can apparently for the first time pursue an adult self-education in interpretation, as distinct from the blandly normative schooling with which her doctor-husband persists by denying her the predictable "irritants" of strenuous reading and writing.

It goes practically without saying that the narrator's vision and predicament cannot be regarded as exclusively symptomatic of *her* psychopathology, either in terms of the contemporary "neuraesthetic" diagnosis or of any imaginable subsequent one (hysteria, paranoid schizophrenia?). Although providing an extremely rich symptomatic text on which even feminists have commented psychoanalytically, wholesale pathologization of the narrator's condition would amount to no more than a renormalizing denial of *The Yellow Wallpaper's* disturbing range of cultural and political implication as well as of the challenges posed by the narrator's animating deviancy. Yet the drastic impasse represented in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is one

in which the narrator's queer cognition, sensibility, and self-instruction are inseparable—practically indistinguishable—from symptoms of a “nervous breakdown,” one that will vindicate the husband's tranquillizing prescriptions. Reduced to a solitary, hysterized “I” following her catastrophic loss of the social personhood designated by the pronoun “one,” the narrator substitutes paranoid self-scrutiny for social surveillance, and she is further threatened by an ego-depleting outflow into the room and its objects: “There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down. . . . those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere” (p. 29). The protagonist's own recourses, including her upholding of discursive propriety, seem increasingly like manifestations of her ailment, not defenses against it. Attempting, for example, to defend against her new vulnerability to the temptation and threat of free fall, culminating in sudden “suicide” (p. 26), “a broken neck,” “headlong plunges of equal distraction” (p. 31), the narrator tries to recover the supposedly safe, healing ground of childhood fantasy:

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big, old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe. (p. 29)

Yet this nostalgic regression merely retraces the narrator's adult experience to a childhood already strange, solitary, and fiercely threatening.

Her attempt to implicate the reader represents a failing attempt to normalize her own condition: “we all know how much expression [inanimate things] have!” (p. 29). If “we” do indeed know this, we have in all likelihood repressed it as an ego-threatening form of consciousness, thus making the narrator's appeal seem all the more “queer,” or eccentric.²⁸ We the readers are thus likely to be positioned in advance as normal with respect to the narrator's deviancy. Yet reading *The Yellow Wallpaper* under the aspect of queer theory may contribute to a certain consciousness of repression and hence to “queer” self-recognition on the part of the reader. In this respect as in so many others, *The Yellow Wallpaper* lends itself to a queer pedagogy in which depathologization of the queer-female protagonist coincides with depathologization in a different sense of the normal (i.e., repressed) reader.

In line with this pedagogy, Gilman's text may serve as a historical benchmark in relation to which recent progress in the depathologization of the queer-female predicament and *proper* recognition of the queer-female cultural subject can be measured. This historic achievement has consisted partly in the construction of political and pedagogic loci in

which the queer-female is released from purely subjective isolation or extreme marginalization. She is enabled to assume social being and is released as well from a purely oppositional relation to good form. As a pedagogic text, however, *The Yellow Wallpaper* also confirms the importance of distinguishing carefully between depathologization and a wholesale denial of pathology. Gilman's own polemical redetermination of her protagonist's ailment as a purely sociological condition arising from female unemployment and incapacitation provides a cautionary example; so does the radical feminist attempt during the 1970s to shake off psychoanalysis as a therapy and as an epistemological formation. The denial of pathology is not just a potentially damaging denial of mental illness as an identifiable entity, however politically or culturally overdetermined it may be, but a denial of the interfacing difficulties to be negotiated between the pedagogical and the pathological as soon as "pedagogy" comes to mean something more than normalizing conditioning. Moreover, the denial of pathology is tantamount to denial of the long-range implicating power, refinement, justification, permeability, and even sensibility of pathologizing discourse from classical melancholia through nineteenth-century *neuraesthesia* up to contemporary psychoanalysis. Sedgwick distinguishes, exemplarily I believe, between psychoanalysis as an indispensable heuristic, allowing "possibly spacious affordances," and "revisionist psychoanalysis, including ego-psychology," under which virtually genocidal programs of pedagogic and political normalization are pursued.²⁹

Beyond these immediate considerations, I will finally suggest that queer reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper* creates its own perspective on some recent critical history. Gilman's text may well testify, as Lutz has argued, to the virtually epistemic as well as epidemic status of "*neuraesthesia*" in the late nineteenth-century U.S., the term "*neuraesthesia*" ultimately designating a mode of social being and a ground of knowledge during this period, not just a localizable female malady. Lutz's synchronic cut in the year 1900 facilitates recognition of the epistemic dimension of *neuraesthesia*. Yet in addition to promoting recognition of this widely dispersed, turn-of-the-century *neuraesthesia*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* lends itself to synoptic consideration of the entire post-nineteenth-century epoch in which psychotherapeutic discourse acquires increasing cultural centrality, not just as a means of normalizing enforcement (enforcing norms, making enforcement normal), but as the crucial locus of subject-construction in the culture at large. The queer effects of *The Yellow Wallpaper* are produced within and against the discourse of *neuraesthesia* as a dominant discourse—how else would they make sense?—yet they are not wholly determined by, or contained within, the phase of *neuraesthesia*. Queerness already has a history prior to its "*neuraesthetic*" redetermination in the late nineteenth cen-

ture, and that redetermination in turn testifies to the post-nineteenth-century ascent of pathologizing discourse as culturally formative discourse. Both *The Yellow Wallpaper* and the remarkable critical commentary it has already elicited suggest that, from the late nineteenth century onward, pathologizing discourse as dominant discourse increasingly takes precedence over, for example, traditional literary discourse or social conduct-instruction as “formative.” It likewise increasingly subsumes and redeploys pedagogic powers and general categories of social and aesthetic good form. The transformation of the schoolroom and gymnasium in *The Yellow Wallpaper* into a ward in which the queer-female “patient” is confined—“wife” being reconstituted as “patient” while “husband” is reconstituted as “doctor”—could hardly be more pointed, while the emergence of psychoanalytic discourse as broad cultural discourse could hardly be more telling. It is under precisely these conditions that depathologization becomes an especially important common enterprise of feminism and queer theory. Yet if it remains important to establish that being a woman or being queer is not tantamount to being sick or insane, it is hardly trivial to establish that being so is not tantamount, either, to exhibiting bad form.

NOTES

¹ Catherine Golden, ed., *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on “The Yellow Wallpaper”* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1992).

² The history of *The Yellow Wallpaper*’s rejection and eventual obscurity, followed by revival in 1973 by The Feminist Press, is extensively told in *The Captive Imagination*. See especially Catherine Golden, “One Hundred Years of Reading ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” in *The Captive Imagination*, pp. 1–23.

³ Perhaps this locution marks the narrator-author’s forcing of language to bear her occult meanings. See, however, Mary Jacobus, “An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading,” in *The Captive Imagination*, pp. 288–89, on “smooches” as “the unsayable in Gilman’s story—the sexual etiology of hysteria . . . but also the repression imposed by the 1890s on the representation of female sexuality, and, in particular, the repression imposed on women’s writing.”

⁴ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in *The Captive Imagination*, p. 40. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵ To the extent that Gilman’s story allegorizes feminist reading, with the yellow wallpaper as a figure of the text and the protagonist as its exemplary decipherer, it does so to cautionary as well as enabling effect, as Jacobus among others has argued extensively. Once the narrator identifies an imprisoned woman as the subject or referent of the wallpaper-text—once she recognizes *her* story as the subtext to be read everywhere below the aesthetic surface or “front pattern” (p. 38)—she has broken through. Yet “woman” indistinguishably becomes the hallucinatory reality she has been tearing away the wallpaper to reveal. In this way, Gilman’s story

vindicates Derrida's much-maligned dictum "Il n'y a hors texte," though not as the last word on reading and/as over-reading.

⁶ Insofar as the narrator is writing ostensibly for herself, yet thus violently and exclusively against those who share her social world, a punitive impulse seems more powerful than any conciliating one. The conciliatory-aggressive proportions will shift depending on whether we regard the writing-transaction as one going on between the narrator and her set, the narrator and her ideal reader(s), or Gilman and her reader(s). One very particular reader targeted by Gilman was Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, named in the text (p. 30), to whose rest-cure Gilman had submitted for three months in 1887 after a diagnosis of neurasthenia and postpartum depression. Having heard a report that Mitchell had changed his infantilizing therapy after reading *The Yellow Wallpaper*, of which Gilman had sent him a copy, Gilman remarked, "If that is a fact, I have not lived in vain" (quoted in Golden, ed., *The Captive Imagination*, p. 8). This story and its ramifications have been extensively discussed by feminist critics, so I merely note it here.

⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Foreword," *Tendencies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), p. xii.

⁸ The 1973 republication and success of *The Yellow Wallpaper* coincided roughly with militant feminist impingement on the academy in the 1970s. The extraordinary retrieval, academic legitimation, and crucial gendered reading of an obscure novella by a virtually forgotten nineteenth-century woman writer typifies this phase of academic feminist and/or gynocritical militancy. Marked by a strongly gender-polarized critical discourse and the counter-canonical promotion of suppressed or "forgotten" women's writings, this phase is also the one of virtually unreserved feminist reader-identification with the protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, whose predicament is seen as essentially *woman's* predicament. Contemporary feminism provided the lens through which not only *The Yellow Wallpaper* but broad cultural history became legible in a new way—or truly legible for the first time—as the history of women's oppression.

⁹ The husband's sanity is called in question by Judith Fetterley, in "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *The Captive Imagination*, pp. 253–60. A partial explanation of the doctor-husband's proceedings—and of S. Weir Mitchell's rest-cure, which the husband's treatment faithfully duplicates—is given by Tom Lutz, *American Nervousness, 1903: An Anecdotal History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 221–43. According to Lutz, a dispersed, unlocalizable "neuraesthesia" virtually assumes epistemic as well as epidemic proportions in turn-of-the-century America; the socially approved cure is accordingly a further cause and manifestation of the condition, not its remedy.

¹⁰ For a survey of feminist responses, crisscrossed by theoretical developments of the past two decades, to the landmark Feminist Press republication of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in 1973, see Elaine R. Hedges, "'Out at Last'? 'The Yellow Wallpaper' after Two Decades of Feminist Criticism," in *The Captive Imagination*, pp. 319–33. Two notable moments of "withdrawal" are those enacted by Jacobus, *The Captive Imagination*, pp. 277–95, and Susan Lanser, "Feminist Criticism: 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies*, 15, No. 3 (1989),

415–41. Jacobus cautions against hysterical reading and identification on the part of feminists and offers a qualified rehabilitation of Freud's diagnostic categories, while Lanser recontextualizes Gilman's narrative in the "yellow peril" ideological climate of the 1890s, characterizing the protagonist, for all her protofeminism, as an anxiously genteel, beleaguered, white, middle-class woman, whose precarious subjectivity is constituted mainly with respect to the racialized rather than the gendered Other.

¹¹ Pertinent feminist essays or excerpts in *The Captive Imagination* include ones by Deirdre English, Ann Douglas Wood, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Paula A. Treichler, and Jeffrey Berman. The pertinence of both the medical and juridical senses of the word "case" to *The Captive Imagination* as a feminist critical "case-book" is striking. The juridical aspect of the fictional situation as well as the reader's being called upon to render a verdict is discussed by Fetterley, pp. 253–60.

¹² Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," *Tendencies*, p. 19.

¹³ Sedgwick's academic formalism, most powerfully avowed in "Promising, Smuggling, Reading, Overreading," *Tendencies*, pp. 3–4, is everywhere apparent in her work and has made her a formidable polemicist for standard educational enablement against the journalistic anti-intellectualism and pseudo-populist know-nothingism of the New Right.

¹⁴ Gothic supplied Sedgwick with a hermeneutic point of departure in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Methuen, 1986), yet the gothic monstrosity, with its hidden principle of coherence, turns out to be a weak example in the long run for the queer theorist. Where a "queer" writer like Wilde features in Sedgwick's thinking, it is partly because he too could inhabit (even dominate) the world of literary and social good form. Moreover, in Sedgwick's view, Wilde's criminalized queerness is not constructed in accordance with the psychotherapeutic categories that have subsequently allowed "homosexuality" to be pathologized. In short, he was not a modern "homosexual." See Sedgwick, "Tales of the Avunculate: *The Importance of Being Earnest*," *Tendencies*, pp. 52–72.

¹⁵ See Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Tendencies*, pp. 109–29; "Is the Rectum Straight?: Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*," *Tendencies*, pp. 73–103. The widely perceived dubious, ornate, strangeness of the "late" Henry James style has always made him a troubling exemplar of good form, as has his embarrassing published correspondence. Sedgwick notes that outraged reaction to "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" came in advance of the paper's publication: the six words of the title, published in an MLA program, were enough. This response before the fact implies a certain defensive foreknowledge: Bram Dijkstra, in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 64–82, identifies the masturbating girl as a powerful specter in fin-de-siècle misogyny of the late nineteenth century.

¹⁶ "That's one of the things that 'queer' can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically," in Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," *Tendencies*, p. 8. I should note that queer theorists who have been critical of Sedg-

wick, or have pursued very different critical agendas, have not necessarily embraced monolithic or reductionist conceptions of queer theory. See, for example, Alexander Doty, "Introduction," *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. xi-xix, for some nonreductionist general statements by theorists including Teresa de Lauretis, Michael Warner, Judith Butler, and Sue-Ellen Case.

¹⁷ Sedgwick, "Queer and Now," *Tendencies*, p. 9.

¹⁸ Michael Warner, "From Queer to Eternity," *Voice Literary Supplement*, 106 (June 1992), 19, cited in Doty, p. xiii. Richard Feldstein, in "Reader, Text, and Ambiguous Referentiality in 'The Yellow Wall-Paper,'" in *The Captive Imagination*, p. 308, notes that editors have regularized the spelling of "wallpaper" from the first publication of Gilman's text up through the Feminist Press edition. In Gilman's manuscript, spellings include wallpaper, wall paper, and wall-paper, this hyphenation sometimes being rendered ambiguous by a line-break between "wall-" and "paper." The signification of textuality allowed by these variations is hardly inconsequential, as Feldstein argues.

¹⁹ Quoted from a U.S. Labor Department report. The next citation, from G. Irwin, *Amer. Tramp & Underworld Slang* in 1931, importantly specifies "effeminate or degenerate men or boys" [my emphasis]. Widespread 1950s usage appears to have restricted the term to "effeminate men" and/or male transvestites. The first OED citation for "queer" as applied to women dates from 1974. In H. L. Mencken's historical survey in *The American Language*, "queer" is cited twice in colloquial senses, but never with the meaning "homosexual." I know of no study that places the use of "queer" for "homosexual" earlier than 1922. If Gilman's text can really be said to anticipate the semantic shifts, relocations, and coalescences of "queer," it may be on account of the partly shared cultural location of women and gay men, and on account of widespread "feminine" (self-) construction of visibly gay men in the twentieth century.

²⁰ If, after having fulfilled her part of the procreative bargain, the narrator still experiences "neuraesthetic" malaise, something appears to be lacking in the social reward of maternity and family life: "Such a dear baby! And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so nervous!" (p. 28). The pronoun shift from "him" to "it" (not "he") despecifics the source of this malaise in a way that is characteristic of *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

²¹ Following Gilbert, Gubar, and Jacobus, it is possible to identify the "creeping" women hallucinated by the narrator as avatars of the sexualized-bestialized mad wife in *Jane Eyre*, yet contemporary neo-Darwinian fears of regression and degeneration may also come into play in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. See Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, pp. 210-64, 288-316. As Gilbert and Gubar note in "From *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*," in *The Captive Imagination*, pp. 145-48, Gilman's version of the madwoman in the attic clearly belongs to the tradition of women's writing canonically inaugurated by *Jane Eyre*.

²² Dijkstra, pp. 64-82, 147-59. See also Martha Vicinus, "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of Modern Lesbian Identity," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and

David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 432–52. Professor Beth Newman of SMU (to whom I am indebted for a rigorous and thoughtful reading of this essay) has suggested, primarily on the basis of work done by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Lillian Faderman, that recourse to “sisterly bonding” may have been easier before this late nineteenth-century moment of misogynistic foreclosure.

²³ In “An Unnecessary Maze of Sign-Reading,” in *The Captive Imagination*, Jacobus identifies this particular chiasmus as the figure of hysterical reading—of reading as a constitutively hysterical process—“whenever the disembodied text takes on the aspect of a textual body” (p. 293).

²⁴ In some respects, this narrator’s impulse recapitulates that of Catherine Morland in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. Although more unequivocally naive, Catherine too is a middle-class, female, provincial nobody of some imaginative susceptibility and Gothic reading experience. Austen intervenes, however, through her disciplinary and heterosexually socializing clerical surrogate, Henry Tilney, to reclaim Catherine before things have gone too far. Likewise, she intervenes for Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, Sedgwick’s “masturbating girl,” though perhaps only after things have gone too far for Marianne to be brought back alive and well. The doctor-husband John in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, who isolates his wife from “society and stimulus” (p. 25), would make a smooth Austen villain.

²⁵ T. S. Eliot, “Hamlet and His Problems,” *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), rpt. in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Cyrus Hoy (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 180–84. For Eliot, Art is achieved when an emotion in excess of its produced causes, or stemming from an inexpressibly horrible cause, is connected to a fictional character or circumstance that will seem justifyingly adequate to it. For Eliot, Shakespeare fails in *Hamlet*, the play thus becoming, pejoratively, the Mona Lisa of literature. The gendering of artistic “failure” in Eliot is well discussed by Jacqueline Rose, “Sexuality in the Reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*,” in *Hamlet, A Norton Critical Edition*, pp. 262–81. If Gilman’s story can justly be called a masterpiece—and why not?—it ironically meets Eliot’s specifications, with credit going not just to the woman author but the “crazy” woman writer within the text.

²⁶ Lutz, p. 230.

²⁷ See Sedgwick, “Foreword,” *Tendencies*, p. xii.

²⁸ It is partly her “failure” to repress this animism that sets the narrator up for an experience, precisely in Freud’s terms, of the uncanny. This sense of the uncanny is implicitly distinguished by the narrator herself (p. 25) from Gothic cheap thrills.

²⁹ Sedgwick, “How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys,” *Tendencies*, p. 155.