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NOTES AND QUERIES

“The Yellow Wallpaper” and Women’s Discourse

Paula Treichler’s essay “Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” offers one of the first close and thorough readings of a short story which has long been of interest to feminists but which is also read and employed by psychologists, historians, sociologists, and literary critics. Although the story has had many readers, remarkably little has been written about it. Treichler’s essay provides at once a close reading and a challenging thesis around which discussion can begin. Each time I have taught “The Yellow Wallpaper,” students insist that it describes the progression of one person’s neurosis, for instance that it is the tale of one woman’s mental breakdown caused specifically by postpartum depression. Yet, many details, like the narrator’s lack of a name, argue against her individuality, and similarly, the primer-like names of the husband and sister-in-law—John and Mary—suggest they are merely representatives for Husbands and In-laws. In fact, the most individual name in the story—Weir Mitchell—points away from the narrator and toward the effects of his very specific treatment on people like her. Moreover, as Treichler has shown, “a feminist reading emphasizes the social and economic conditions which drive the narrator—and potentially all women—to madness” (64). In addition to liberating “The Yellow Wallpaper” from overly idiosyncratic readings, Treichler’s essay raises two important issues for readers of Gilman’s story and for feminist critics in particular: first, through her discussion of diagnosis, she works toward a definition of “patriarchal discourse”; and, second, through her close reading of the story, she problematizes the image of the wallpaper, thereby calling into question the notion of women’s discourse.

There can be no doubt that the narrator dwells in the middle of Patriarchy. She is living in “ancestral halls” (9), has just given birth to a boy, is surrounded by men—her husband, her brother, and somewhere in the background, Weir Mitchell—and even the female or females in the house appear to be cardboard figures cut out by the patriarchy—first Mary, the virgin mother who “is so good with the baby” (14) and later Jennie (a word which means a female donkey or beast of burden) who “is a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession” (17–18). Whatever language emerges from this setting can safely be considered

“male.” Further, John is identified in relation to the patriarchy first and in relation to his wife only afterwards: he is “a physician of high standing and one’s own husband” (10). In “The Yellow Wallpaper” the physician is the quintessential man, and his talk, therefore, is the epitome of male discourse. Thus Treichler’s definitions of the physician’s talk—of diagnosis—clarify the nature of this discourse. It is “powerful and public; representing institutional authority, it dictates . . . it privileges the rational, the practical, and the observable” (65), and even more important, it “translate[s] the realities of the human body into human language and back again. As such, it is a perfect example of language which ‘reflects’ reality and simultaneously ‘produces’ it” (69).

As recent discussions of women’s language and women’s relation to language have shown, “women’s discourse” is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to define. Treichler’s analysis of the wallpaper at first acknowledges this by summarizing a variety of interpretations of the meaning of the paper. However, when Treichler offers an alternative reading of the image, she reduces the plurality, fixing the significance of the wallpaper too rigidly. She says:

While these interpretations are plausible and fruitful, I interpret the wallpaper to be women’s writing or women’s discourse, and the women in the wallpaper to be the representation of women that becomes possible only after women obtain their right to speak. In this reading, the yellow wallpaper stands for a new vision of women—one which is constructed differently from the representation of women in patriarchal language. (64)

Although I resist the apparent determinacy of this interpretation, considering the wallpaper as discourse clearly generates important results. Treichler is able to uncover a line of female kinship that challenges the male ancestry. Also, the narrator’s crucial shift in tone to impertinence is foregrounded as Treichler establishes the causal link between the wallpaper and the narrator’s revolt. And even within this reading, Treichler recognizes that “the story only hints at possibilities for change” (74), that “as a metaphor, the yellow wallpaper is never fully resolved . . . its meaning cannot be fixed” (75). Nevertheless, her analysis raises several questions. First, if the wallpaper stands for a new vision of women, why is the narrator tearing it down? Next, how can it be a “representation of women that becomes possible only after women obtain their right to speak,” if it grows more vivid as the narrator becomes less verbal? Moreover, if the narrator comes into her own through the wallpaper, then why does she become more and more a victim of male diagnosis as she becomes further engaged with the wallpaper—that is, although she does free the woman inside the paper, she is tied up, locked in a room, creeping on all fours like the child John has accused her of being, and

moving in a circle that sketches the futility of her liberation through madness. Despite these reservations, I am interested in the notion that the wallpaper represents women's discourse to the extent that the wallpaper is impossible to define.

In fact, the narrator herself answers some of these questions when she attempts to describe the paper: it "commit[s] every artistic sin": "It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions" (13). As she describes it, the wallpaper does seem to resemble all-too-familiar assessments of women's language—first, it "sins" against established forms; it is dull, confusing, irritating, yet nevertheless provoking. Further, the narrator clearly comes to embody the wallpaper's aesthetic when she begins creeping as though she, like its designs, is lame. The most crucial element of her description, however, is the "unheard of contradictions." This, I think, is a key to understanding male and female discourse in the story.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is replete with contradictions. The conjunction of contradiction—"but"—occurs 56 times in this short space and there are numerous instances of other words—and, so, only, besides—employed to mean "but." Every time the narrator speaks, she is interrupted and contradicted until she begins to interrupt and contradict herself. On the opening page she attempts to gain verbal leverage by vigorously beginning sentences that express her opinions with the word "personally"

Personally, I disagree with their ideas.

Personally, I believe that congenial work. . . would do me good. (10)

as though to give emphasis and substance to points she knows will be lost on her husband. And, indeed, to him the word "personally," coming from her, signifies that the ideas to follow can be ignored as mere opinion. As Treichler has shown, the narrator has her own plan for recovery including visits with friends and, most important, a return to her writing. But John contradicts these possibilities. The wallpaper, in fact, sometimes appears like male discourse in its capacity to contradict and immobilize the women who are trapped within it. In this view, the narrator releases herself (and other women) from the paper by tearing it down. *Her* contradictions, however, are "unheard." She can only counter John's dictums literally by refusing to speak, or, metaphorically, by revealing the blankness behind the wallpaper. As Treichler notes, the narrator becomes less verbal as she moves further into the world of the wallpaper. Tearing down the paper, then, is not

the construction of women's discourse; rather, it signals a retreat from discourse precisely because language is male-controlled. The idea of contradiction captures this relationship between male and female discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper." Far more significant than what they say is the fact that John's talk persists while hers falters.

In *New French Feminisms* Xavière Gauthier notes that traditional work in women's language offers two points of view that Gauthier describes as "flip sides of the same prejudiced coin" (162), because they both describe women's writing in relation to men's. First is the notion that if men write one way—straightforwardly, rationally—then women write in the opposite way—intuitively, sensitively. The second idea is that women are just slow learners who will write like men when they catch up.

As an alternative to these views, Gauthier and others suggest another possibility, pointing to "blank pages, gaps, borders, spaces and silence, holes in discourse . . . the aspect of feminine writing which is the most difficult to verbalize because it becomes compromised, rationalized, masculinized as it explains itself . . . If the reader feels a bit disoriented in this new space, one which is obscure and silent, it proves perhaps, that it is women's space" (164). If the narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" in any sense discovers women's discourse, it exists in the blankness behind the wallpaper. She certainly associates that blankness with freedom: "I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (36). But is this freedom of expression, and if so, at what cost does she achieve it?

There is much evidence in women's writing—both in fiction and in theory—of this retreat to what Gauthier calls "this new space," and to what Gilman describes as the blank spaces behind the wallpaper. In fact, "The Yellow Wallpaper" narrator participates in a long tradition in women's writing of retreat to such a state. In the location of such a place outside language and outside male influence and in the tendency for women to find other women there, this new space can be symbolically connected to the pre-Oedipal (in Freud's terms) or the Imaginary (in Lacan's). Marianne Hirsch compares this state to the pre-Oedipal phase outlined in psychoanalytic writing:

Attachment to this phase is characterized by fusion, fluidity, mutuality, continuity and lack of differentiation, as well as by the heroines' refusal of a heterosexual social reality that violates their psychological needs, a reality defined by images of fragmentation, separation, discontinuity, alienation, and self-denial. Faced with the break between psychological needs and social imperatives, literary convention finds only one possible resolution: the heroine's death. (27)

I would add to death the heroine's madness, especially since most of the deaths in this tradition are preceded by madness. Hirsch looks beyond the

self-destructiveness of these endings and sees, like “The Yellow Wallpaper” narrator, some cause for elation:

if we look at what adulthood and maturity mean for the female protagonists of these texts, at the confinement, discontinuity, and stifling isolation that define marriage and motherhood, they do not present positive options. . . . I submit that the heroines’ allegiance to childhood, pre-Oedipal desire, spiritual withdrawal, and ultimately death is not neurotic but a realistic and paradoxically fulfilling reaction to an impossible contradiction. (27–28)

Hirsch’s reading redeems the lives and deaths of many heroines, both literary and actual—notably, Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* who dwells in madness and plunges to her death; Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening*, Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*, and Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* who drown; Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth*, Madame Bovary, and the wife and mother in “A Sorrowful Woman” who die by drugs; or Joan Ogden in *The Unlit Lamp* who simply gives up the ghost. These are only a few of the characters whose lives might seem less bitterly wasted under such a reading. But however dignified and victorious these resolutions into madness and death may seem in relation to the compromised life of marriage and motherhood, they are not ultimately acceptable. As the holes, blanks, gaps, and borders (that Gauthier proposes are the sites of women’s language) are no substitute for words on the center of the page; lethargy, depravity, and suicide are not alternatives to a fulfilling life.

Fortunately, recent developments in the tradition of women’s writing make it no longer necessary to celebrate silences. In the last ten years or so—but not exclusively, since there have always been women writing whose visions were positive—the endings of women’s stories are turning the tables on a patriarchy that imposes sentences of madness and death as the only alternatives to marriage, motherhood, and conformity. Thus in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the *hero* is bitten by a rabid dog and goes mad, and the *heroine* has to shoot him to save herself. In Alice Walker’s “Really, Doesn’t Crime Pay?” the narrator tries to behead her frustrating husband with a chain saw (he is saved in the nick of time when the noise awakens him). In Joanna Russ’s *On Strike Against God*, two women are practicing target shooting at the end of the book when a

respectably dressed Professorial type appeared in the gap in the front hedge . . . saying, amused—as if it were any of his business!—“What are you girls doing?” Jean had swung the gun around, quite coldly. And pulled back the safety catch. “Get out!” He turned pale and backing away, vanished behind the hedge. (97)

More recently, in *The Color Purple*, Walker envisions a new phase of the tradition when her heroine can transcend oppression *and* anger through

writing, working, and loving women. And finally, in *Sources*, a long poem published two years ago, Adrienne Rich associates women's new possibilities specifically with their ability to use language:

When
I speak of an end to suffering I don't mean anesthesia.
I mean knowing the world, and my place in it, not in
order to stare with bitterness or detachment, but as a
powerful and womanly series of choices: and here I
write the words, in their fullness:
powerful; womanly. (35)

Clearly, these endings are more possible in a world where women can work, write, refuse marriage, love more freely, own guns, and operate buzz saws. The connection Treichler discovers in "The Yellow Wallpaper" between women's discourse and self-discovery is applicable to contemporary developments in women's literature where women—writers and characters—are proving that language can be both powerful and womanly.

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