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The Reading Habit and “The Yellow Wallpaper”

During Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s engagement to Walter Stetson, a friend offered her a copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Gilman refused to accept the volume, saying that she would never read Whitman. Discussing this incident, Ann Lane attributes Gilman’s refusal of the book to the influence of Stetson who apparently “accepted, at least for his fiancée, the conventional view of his day that defined Whitman’s poetry as unseemly and unsavory.”¹ Any anxiety Stetson may have had about the consequences of reading *Leaves of Grass* would have rested upon another perfectly “conventional view” of the day, the notion that one’s reading could have an enduring impact on one’s life, whether benign or pernicious.

Much has been written about Gilman’s relation to the work of writing, but her relation to reading deserves more attention than it has received. At the end of the nineteenth century, many writers, reviewers, and educators were preoccupied by the pros and cons of what was widely referred to as *the reading habit*. I suggest that “The Yellow Wallpaper” reflects culturally typical anxieties about certain kinds of fiction reading, especially the practice of reading for escape, through projection and identification. Whether or not Gilman shared these anxieties—and I believe that she did—her most famous story provides an oblique but powerful image of a reader who is temporarily exhilarated but ultimately destroyed while absorbed in a mesmerizing text. The figure of the narrator-protagonist reflects Gilman’s own intensely conflicted relation to reading, including her painful inability to read at all during the period of emotional upheaval on which the story is based. Attention to the narrative’s self-reflexive concern with the dy-

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namics of reading elucidates not only Gilman's own reading practices but also her commitment to fiction "with a purpose," as she referred to "The Yellow Wallpaper" in an exchange with William Dean Howells.²

Although Gilman's "purpose" in writing "The Yellow Wallpaper" was misunderstood by many of her contemporaries, the strong emotional impact of the story was never in doubt. When Horace Scudder rejected the story for the *Atlantic*, he wrote Gilman: "I could not forgive myself, if I made others as miserable as I have made myself" (*L*, 119). Less well-known than Scudder's famous response are the comments of a reader who sent a letter of "protest" to the *Boston Transcript* after "The Yellow Wallpaper" appeared in the *New England Magazine*. Charging that "such literature contains deadly peril," the letter devotes particular attention to the story's powerful grip upon its reader: "It is graphically told, in a somewhat sensational style, which makes it difficult to lay aside, after the first glance, til it is finished, holding the reader in morbid fascination to the end" (*L*, 120).

This description of reading "The Yellow Wallpaper" bears an uncanny resemblance to the way Gilman's story itself represents the narrator: "morbidly fascinated" by the wall-paper, increasingly preoccupied with it, and determined to follow its pattern to "some sort of conclusion."³ In the course of the story, the narrator herself becomes a reader—an avid, indeed an obsessive, reader—of the paper on the walls that surround her. From a nineteenth-century point of view, the narrator becomes what Nancy Glazener has recently called an "addictive" reader: one who reads incessantly and who, while doing so, loses her last remaining hold on reality.⁴

Gilman's nameless protagonist enters an action-filled world that she creates by inference from a printed design. As a result, her depression and despair are temporarily dispelled. Like a reader absorbed in an exciting tale, the narrator "follow[s] that pattern about by the hour." Soon she finds that "[l]ife [is] very much more exciting . . . than it used to be . . . I have something more to expect, to look forward to" ("YW," 19, 27). Like a reader who can't put a book down, she no longer sleeps much "at night for it is so interesting to watch developments" (28). Like the reader of a detective story (a popular genre at the end of the last century), the narrator's assiduity pays off and she "discovers something at last" (29).

To perceive the narrator as a kind of fiction reader is to see that Gilman's story projects a brilliant nightmare version of what many

nineteenth-century commentators represented as a common reading practice—and a dangerous one. In a phrase that might have been used by any antifiction critic of the period, Gilman's narrator herself notes the paper's "vicious influence" ("YW," 16).⁵ Literary journals of the period repeatedly distinguished the valuable habit of consuming books for "pleasure and improvement" from the kind of reading habit associated with inferior reading material and an inferior reader (often, though not always, a woman). If we reflect upon "The Yellow Wallpaper" in this context, it can be seen as a kind of cautionary tale about nineteenth-century reading—especially, but not exclusively, women's reading.⁶

To put some historical pressure on both the idea of the narrator as a reader and that of the wall-paper as a text, I will set aside the usual critical emphasis on the content of the story that the wall-paper implies. Like the narrator herself, critics of the last twenty years have devoted a great deal of attention to the writing on the wall and have suggested that the wall-paper—like Gilman's story—tells the tale of nineteenth-century women, rendered querulous, infantile, and passive by the restrictions imposed upon them.⁷ With this aspect of the story well established, much can be gained by seeing the wall-paper not only as a symbolic text but also as, literally, a fictional one.

Understood metaphorically, the problem of reading in "The Yellow Wallpaper" has been much discussed. The idea that the narrator comes to understand her own existential situation by reading herself into the wall-paper has been taken as a key to the story for almost twenty years. With its dominant pattern, its subordinate pattern, and its emerging image of a woman behind bars, the wall-paper has often been seen to represent the "patriarchal text" in which literary women—in fact, all women—are trapped.⁸ Of course the wall-paper is not always taken as a constricting or constraining text; sometimes it appears to be one that enables the narrator to confront her own situation and gain access to long-suppressed feelings. "Blocked from expressing herself *on* paper," Judith Fetterley writes, the narrator "seeks to express herself *through* paper. . . . [S]he converts the wall*paper* into her text . . . [and] recognizes in [it] elements of her own resisting self."⁹ The wall-paper, in short, is repeatedly seen as a kind of text, yet it is never exactly a text that the narrator writes, nor is it exactly a text that she reads.

The wall-paper has neither words nor pages. Perhaps that is why it

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has so often been seen as an image of the narrator's life, never as an analog of Gilman's writing, or of other fictional works. Still, the narrator "follows" the paper as if it were a story with a plot. Through the image of the narrator, Gilman inscribes a kind of protocol of reading into her story: the narrator's "addictive" reading provides a forceful image of how Gilman's tale is *not* to be read.¹⁰ This image points to a reader who was widely presumed to exist in the nineteenth-century United States—the kind of fiction reader who was repeatedly attacked for what one doctor at midcentury called a "profitless, pernicious habit, [which] . . . poisons the imagination [and] dissipates the mind."¹¹

The Reading Habit

"The Yellow Wallpaper" sets out to modify contemporary conceptions of readers and reading by emphasizing the social as well as the psychic consequences of the narrator's reading habit. If we see the narrator's relation to the wall-paper as the relation of a nineteenth-century reader to a fictional text, we have a schematic representation of a practice that was severely criticized in the 1880s and 1890s. The antifiction prejudice and the widespread ambivalence about the potential effects of the reading habit were deeply ingrained elements of the literary culture within and for which Gilman wrote.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, men of letters regarded the emerging genre of the novel with suspicion. Although disapproval of fiction lost much of its force between the 1860s and 1890s, it did not disappear. Even at the end of the century, editors, educators, and reviewers often denounced a mode of reading that was presumed to result in the loss of borders and therefore of the reader's reality-sense. This kind of reading, moreover, was generally associated with fiction that, like the wall-paper itself, often seemed flamboyant, inconsistent, or outrageous. As many commentators saw it, fiction in general, and certain kinds of fiction in particular, fostered a merger between the reader and imaginary figures. Sentimental fiction, historical romance, and other popular genres were repeatedly charged with encouraging passivity, escapism, and emotional extravagance.¹² The "novel-reading habit" in particular was identified with a lack of control. Associated with lower appetites, intemperance, and even corruption, it was seen to foster delusions, indiscriminate desire, and the

possible breaking of social boundaries. Carried away by impossible visions represented in "glaring colors," a reader might well lose his or her sense of place, or even self.¹³

Such an outcome was quite different from that attributed to active, critical reading—the kind promoted at mid-century by writers like Melville or Thoreau and praised in many contexts both before and after the Civil War.¹⁴ Between the 1850s and 1890s, educators, writers, and reviewers repeatedly differentiated between passive or frivolous reading and reading that was serious, active, and conducive to self-development. Toward the end of the century, many commentators stressed the innumerable benefits to be gained by "spending less than an hour a day" on reading. As one such article on "The Reading Habit" put it, "Of all the habits that can be cultivated, none is more productive of pleasure and improvement than that of reading, provided the books be well chosen."¹⁵ Throughout the century, similar formulations appeared in manuals with titles like *How to Read a Book*, *The Choice of Books*, and Noah Porter's influential *Books and Reading: What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?*¹⁶ Such discussions regularly stressed the critical faculty—the need for activity, choice, and purposiveness in reading.

As an adolescent and a young woman, Gilman saw herself as just the kind of diligent and purposive reader projected by cultural custodians like Noah Porter, Edward Everett Hale (Gilman's uncle), or her own librarian-father, Frederick Perkins. Gilman's "learned father," as she describes him on the first page of her autobiography, was the author of *The Best Reading*, a reference book that "was for long the standard" (*L*, 4). Indeed, Gilman claims that she always associated the word *father* with "advice about books and the care of them" (*L*, 5–6). When Gilman was seventeen she wrote to her absentee father, asking him to provide a list of books that she could use as a starting point for her most ambitious goal: "improvement of the human race" (*L*, 36, 47).

Between the ages of 16 and 21, Gilman believed that her "steady reading" would give her access to "the larger movements of the time" and enable her to "live . . . in the world as a whole" with all its "needless evils" (*L*, 61). She read voraciously, seeking a way "to help humanity" and disciplining herself with all her "powers of ratiocination" (*L*, 70, 74). As Gilman represents this phase of her life, the image of her reading self suggests a passionate commitment to the sort of vigorous, reality-bound reading praised by nineteenth-century commentators. It

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is not surprising to find that fiction reading plays virtually no role in Gilman's account of her development.¹⁷

In writing "The Yellow Wallpaper," Gilman entered a highly contested literary field where many fictional genres jockeyed for position. She had a very clear sense of what her own fiction was not to provide: escapist visions and vicarious emotional gratification. One could say of Gilman's fiction in general what Ann Lane says of Gilman's utopia: it "leads us back to reality," not away from it.¹⁸ Even Gilman's most fanciful stories—"When I Was a Witch" or "If I Were a Man"—employ whimsy for highly pragmatic ends, creating a sharp focus on social conventions in contemporary America.¹⁹ Before examining the narrator's reading practices in "The Yellow Wallpaper" more closely, a brief look at another Gilman story will suggest how Gilman could inscribe a protocol of reading into her text with a few deft strokes.

A minor character in "The Girl with the Pink Hat" is "a romantic soul," who is always reading "foolish stories" in "her interminable magazines."²⁰ Such stories are mocked not just by Gilman's tone but also by her own didactic purposes. Toward the end of "The Girl with the Pink Hat," Gilman seems to concede that there might be some advantages to a tale that simply "take[s] up your mind" and diverts it ("G," 46). On the last page of the story, the innocent victim of male duplicity and aggression "happen[s] on one of Leroy Scott's doubly involved detective stories, [and] . . . forget[s] her own distresses for a while following those of other people" ("G," 46). The girl's "escapist" reading in this context seems harmless enough. Yet this character has fallen in love with a con man. Seduced by his fictions, she has failed to act rationally on her own behalf. Only the narrator's intervention saves the "girl in pink" from destruction. She is rescued because the narrator, seated behind her on a train, pays attention to the troubles of a fellow passenger rather than whiling away her time with "foolish stories."

"The Girl in the Pink Hat" can be taken as a gloss on Gilman's sense of the contrast between escapist fiction and her own work. There was a crucial difference for Gilman between reading that might become a substitute for the "real" world and reading that might lead one to confront it. No story of hers engages this problem more forcefully than "The Yellow Wallpaper."

The Narrator Reads

Presented in the form of a diary, "The Yellow Wallpaper" begins with a focus on the narrator's writing.²¹ Many discussions of the tale emphasize the narrator's frustrated need and desire to write. However, as Annette Kolodny and Richard Feldstein have noted, the focus on writing disappears entirely by the middle of the text.²² The last reference to the narrator's writing appears at the beginning of the fourth section ("I don't know why I should write this" ["YW," 21]). As her effort to write is abandoned, it is replaced by a growing determination to read the pattern inscribed in the wall-paper.

The narrator turns out to be far more persistent as a reader than she has been as a writer, and her commitment only increases as the story continues. Early on, the narrator repeatedly seeks a way out of the room where she is confined. Once she becomes engrossed in the wall-paper, however, her desire to escape diminishes and then disappears. She becomes "fond of the room . . . *because* of the paper" ("YW," 19) and determined to satisfy her curiosity about its design. The narrator grows increasingly absorbed in the paper and intensely possessive about it: "There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me or ever will," she insists (22).

Although the narrator is not represented as much of a reader until the middle of the story, certain details point to her reading habits as early as the opening section. In her initial description of the house she inhabits, the narrator notes: "It makes me think of English places that you read about" ("YW," 11). These lines do not specify a particular kind of text that makes the narrator "think of English places," but they do establish her as a reader. When the narrator subsequently notes that if the house were "haunted" she would reach the "heights of romantic felicity," we may infer that she has been reading Gothic fiction ("YW," 9).²³

The narrator's "romantic" sensibility is elaborated through many details in the text, and it has often been seen as part of the contrast between her and her husband, a contrast sharply drawn along stereotypical gender lines. While the narrator seeks "romantic felicity," John is "practical in the extreme" ("YW," 9). From John's point of view, his wife's "imaginative power and habit of story making" only exacerbate her "nervous weakness" (15). References to her "silly fancies" and "foolish fancy" abound (22, 24). As critics have noted, John's view of

his wife as fanciful serves his effort to dismiss her ideas, keep her from creative work, and confine her to domestic functions.

At the outset, however, the narrator's response to the wall-paper itself is far from fanciful or romantic. Instead, it is critical and somewhat detached. "I never saw a worse paper in my life," she declares in her first description of it—"[o]ne of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" ("YW," 13). Many of the narrator's statements about the wall-paper suggest that she is familiar with the vocabulary of aesthetic discourse. Repelled by the wall-paper's "flamboyant pattern," she stresses its "artistic" limitations (13) and asserts: "I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation or repetition or symmetry, or anything else I ever heard of" (20). These comments designate the paper as an aesthetic object, which the narrator initially considers from a relatively analytic point of view. She approaches the paper with a set of assumptions about aesthetic unity and what she calls "the principle of design" (20). Thus the narrator is represented not only as a middle-class woman and fiction reader but also as an educated person whose reading has not been confined to ghost stories.

The categories used by the narrator, however, often seem unsuited to description of a material artifact and indeed more appropriate to discussion of a narrative. If we imagine the wall-paper as a fictional text—sometimes dull and repetitive but also flamboyant, outrageous, self-contradictory, and repellent—we might see it as a sentimental or sensational work, the sort denounced by many nineteenth-century critics, especially those who were partial to realism. It will seem less fanciful to think of the wall-paper in these terms if we take a closer look at how the story renders the narrator's increasing desire to "follow" the printed pattern on the wall.

While the narrator offers intermittent aesthetic or analytic remarks about the composition of the paper until late in the story, her commentary reflects a growing disposition to read the pattern like a plot—a sequence of events—structured around human agents. The narrator's tendency to see the paper as a form that harbors human life is evident from early in the story.²⁴ At first she attributes human qualities to isolated elements of the design—its "broken neck," or "unblinking eyes." "Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd unblinking eyes are everywhere," she notes ("YW," 16). But "lolling necks" and "unblinking eyes" are not the only animated features of the

pattern. "Looked at in one way," the narrator suggests in the third section, "the bloated curves and flourishes—a kind of 'debased Romanesque' with *delirium tremens*—go waddling up and down." The paper's "curves and flourishes" are not explicitly identified as human figures here, but they are nothing if not animated. First they "waddl[e]"; soon they "run off . . . in full chase" ("YW," 20). Moreover, the narrator identifies the "curves and flourishes" with "*delirium tremens*"—a strictly human affliction (and one that gains additional resonance in the context of the narrator's own emerging "habit").²⁵

As the narrator continues to contemplate the paper, its trembling animation only seems to increase. At times she reads the design as one might read a tale of adventure, throwing herself imaginatively into the midst of the action. Her efforts to "follow" the pattern are repeatedly frustrated, but her desire to do so is a recurrent—in fact, a pervasive—emphasis in the story. She is preoccupied with the design's "lack of sequence" ("YW," 25) and bent upon resolving the seemingly irrational pattern into some sort of mimetic representation—one with a beginning, a middle, and an end. "I *will* follow [the] . . . pattern to some sort of a conclusion," she insists (19).

What we might call the climax of the narrator's reading experience occurs when "at last" she discovers the woman behind bars ("YW," 29). This of course is the image that has galvanized readers of the last twenty years into reclaiming "The Yellow Wallpaper" for the literary canon in general and for feminist criticism in particular. But since the main focus of the present argument is the process or experience of reading, rather than the implications of domestic ideology, the point to emphasize here is that the narrator gradually discerns a distinct story line in the pattern that she "follows." This story line centers upon a figure that takes on human features, motivations, and finally a specifically human shape. Soon the narrator identifies herself with both the figure and the plot that she has discovered (or projects). Indeed, toward the end of the story, she merges with that figure and enters that plot.

Addictive Reading or Creative Practice?

The narrator attributes human features and motives to the paper until the end of the story, but gradually the image of the woman behind bars becomes the central focus of her attention. As discussions of "The

Yellow Wallpaper” have noted, the narrator comes to read the wallpaper primarily by seeing her own situation—her entrapment, frustration, and anger—reflected back to her, first through the “strange, provoking, formless sort of figure” whose identity is unclear, and finally through the woman who “shake[s] the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (“YW,” 18, 23).

Many readers of the story have argued that the narrator’s developing relation to the wall-paper is a process of self-recognition, one that boldly confronts reality, even though the price is high.²⁶ However, the narrator’s identification with the figure of the imprisoned woman can be seen, on the contrary, as a practice that divorces her from reality. By the time the narrator triumphantly announces, “I’ve got out at last . . . [and] you can’t put me back,” she no longer differentiates between herself and the woman in the paper at all (“YW,” 36). It is in this sense that the narrator’s behavior looks like an extreme version (perhaps even a parody) of novel-reading as antifiction critics imagined it—an activity that, by eliciting the reader’s own fantasies, could render her (or him) useless for “the real businesses of life.”²⁷

Writing in the *Forum* in 1894, Hjalmar Hjorth Boyeson expresses characteristic anxieties about the detrimental effects of sensational and “inferior” fiction. Using the trope of addiction, Boyeson reflects upon Jean Jacques Rousseau’s representation of reading in *The Confessions*. According to Boyeson, Rousseau “was unfitted for life by the reading of novels.” *The Confessions*, Boyeson argues, shows how Rousseau sought refuge in fiction from “the ‘sordid’ reality which surrounded him.” He read “with a ravenous appetite for the intoxication which he craved . . . more and more. . . . Like the opium habit the craving for fiction grew upon him, until the fundamental part of him suffered irreparable harm.” Boyeson emphasizes that the “detrimental effects” caused by Rousseau’s “intemperance in the matter of fiction” were the typical result of “dwelling too long” in an alternative reality constructed by reading.²⁸

In another essay on “The Novel-Reading Habit,” published in 1898, George Clarke, like Boyeson, elaborated the seductive powers of fiction by comparing “[t]he effects of novel-reading . . . with those of indulgence in opium or intoxicating liquors” (“NRH,” 674). Emphasizing that “[t]he sensations excited by fiction . . . are superior in rapidity of succession to those of real life,” Clarke notes that fiction seems to offer “escape” from “tedium and anxiety” (“NRH,” 671, 674). Among

the "easiest victims," he explains, are "[p]ersons . . . who have an abundance of leisure time, and who have not acquired by education a healthy interest in subjects of serious study or a taste for what is best in literature" ("NRH," 674). The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," subjected to the enforced "rest" of a "cure" for depression and prevented from exercising whatever interest she may have had in "the best" literature, reads the wall-paper precisely for relief from "tedium, . . . anxiety," and the pressures of "real life." But for her, as for Boyeson's Rousseau or Clarke's addicted novel-reader, what begins as diversion ends as intensified debility and even obsession.

When nineteenth-century commentators emphasized that if a reader were to identify too completely with a fictional character he or she might have trouble returning to the demands and the limits of daily reality, they drew upon another common assumption about reading: the idea that the novel-reader was a self-involved and isolated person.²⁹ By 1890 an "excessive indulgence in novel-reading" had long been associated with the image of the solitary reader. The act of reading—private, silent, infinitely absorbing—was seen as a kind of metonymy for the dangerous moral and social situation of every fiction reader, first cut off from daily life in the very act of reading, and then later, as a consequence, radically dissociated from appropriate social roles and responsibilities.³⁰ I suggest that by elaborating the narrator's preoccupation with the woman in the wall-paper until it reaches fantastic proportions, Gilman sought to prevent her own readers from identifying uncritically with the narrator's situation, thereby in a sense reproducing it. If "The Yellow Wallpaper," as Fetterley suggests, is "a text that can help the woman reader to effect . . . [an] escape" from the constrictions of domesticity (such as Gilman herself achieved in her own life),³¹ it is such a text only insofar as readers employ a particular reading strategy, one quite different from that of the narrator herself.

Like all Gilman's work, "The Yellow Wallpaper" has clear didactic purposes. Gilman meant her story to be read as social criticism—not as a stimulant for excitement and suspense, like detective fiction or a ghost story. But Gilman well knew that there could be a considerable gap between an author's intention and a reader's response. How could she lead her reader to perceive the wider social issues implicit in the narrator's experience? I have been proposing that Gilman designed her tale to discourage her readers from identifying with the narrator as the narrator identifies with the woman in the wall-paper's sub-

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pattern. From this point of view, there is a certain irony in the fact that feminist readings of “The Yellow Wallpaper” have relied so heavily on identification with the narrator. As Susan Lanser pointed out in 1989, feminist interpretations of the story have often been shaped by “an unacknowledged over-identification with the narrator-protagonist. . . . I now wonder,” Lanser writes, “whether many of us have repeated the gesture of the narrator, . . . [determined to] read until she finds what she was looking for. . . . [W]e . . . may have reduced the text’s complexity to what we need most: our own image reflected back to us.”³² Feminist readers, of course, do not literally identify the woman in the wallpaper as themselves; nor do they (like the narrator) see the printed text as their own habitat or antagonist. Thus, as Lanser notes, the final move of many feminist discussions has been to shift the focus of attention from the narrator to the author of the tale. The story encourages this move in part by the structural anomaly created when the narrator stops writing. In the course of the story, the narrator’s preoccupation with the wall-paper displaces her desire to write in her diary and culminates in her quixotic attack on the material text. Stripping paper off the walls, crawling around the floor of the nursery, she cannot be imagined as writing at all, and at this juncture, if one asks whose writing we are reading, the figure of Gilman herself comes into view.

The Author as Reader

Like the narrator-protagonist she created, Gilman was both a writer and a reader. Gilman’s own defiance of the doctor’s orders—her persistence as a writer—is well known to students of her work. Yet her reading practices, which have received little emphasis, are equally relevant not only to the design of “The Yellow Wallpaper” but also to the experience on which the story draws. I have already suggested that Gilman’s reading as a young woman provides a sharp contrast to both the narrator and the “addicted” novel-readers so graphically imagined by certain commentators of the period. Indeed, like Edith Wharton and other upper- and middle-class women of her generation, Gilman was forbidden to read novels as a child.³³ Reconstructing her childhood in her autobiography, Gilman (like Wharton again) emphasizes the powerful attraction of scenes created by her own imagination. Gilman describes how she devoted a portion of each day to imag-

ined scenarios until the age of thirteen, when she was required by her mother's disapproval to "give them up."³⁴ It was after renouncing the pleasures of what she calls "wishing" that Gilman wrote to her father for a list of the "best books." From this point on, as Gilman tells it, she read for the logic and hard facts of natural history, philosophy, and science. She would seem to have internalized the disapproval widely associated with fictional worlds in late-nineteenth-century American culture.

As I have noted, Gilman's "reading habit" helped her shape large ambitions for herself and her society. In this sense her experience as a reader corresponds to a pattern that recent feminist historians have traced. By drawing on the letters, diaries, and common-place books of nineteenth-century women, as well as on the work of reader response critics and theorists of reading, Mary Kelley, Barbara Sicherman, and others have shown how for many women of the period, reading became an active and "creative" practice with "transformative potential."³⁵ This view of nineteenth-century women's reading constitutes a challenge to the image of the passive or addicted fiction reader. It also challenges an idea proposed by Wai Chee Dimock: that "The Yellow Wallpaper" was designed for a woman reader who did not exist at the turn of the century.³⁶ The nineteenth-century women whose reading habits Kelley and Sicherman describe were the forerunners of the "professional" readers who rediscovered Gilman's tale a century later.

Up to a point, the work of Sicherman, Kelley, and others restates the idea of women's reading as a private encounter in which a book—often a novel—stimulates the fantasy or imagination of a solitary reader. But these historians represent the reading experience as empowering and creative, not solipsistic or self-destructive. Describing the reading habits in one Victorian middle-class family for whom reading was a central activity, Sicherman emphasizes "the freedom of imagination women found in books. . . . Reading provided space—physical, temporal, psychological—that permitted women to exempt themselves from traditional gender expectations, whether imposed by formal society or by family obligation."³⁷ Discussing Alice Hamilton and her siblings, for example, Sicherman underscores the imaginative intensity of the reading experience.³⁸ There are times, to be sure, when this intensity suggests the very dynamic that elicited the concern of the antifiction critics. Writing in her diary in 1890, the young Agnes Hamilton describes herself as living "in the world of novels all the time" and ex-

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presses anxiety about her “‘insane passion’ for reading.” Comparing it to “an addiction,” Hamilton notes that she has “‘resolved not to read another novel for a week at least, and [that she] consequently feels like a reformed drunkard.’”³⁹ The imagery of addiction and intemperance should sound familiar by now, but it is important here to stress the differences between Hamilton’s “insane [reading] passion” and the “addictive” reading imagined by antifiction critics, or by Gilman in “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Insofar as Hamilton’s reading threatened to overwhelm her at times, she herself considered it a problem and reflected upon the issue. But more than that, Hamilton’s reading, like that of her sisters and many other nineteenth-century middle-class women, took place not in isolation but in the framework of a highly supportive interpretive community where books were often read aloud in company and discussed in a variety of contexts.⁴⁰ Many nineteenth-century women were avid consumers of books, but they did not necessarily read alone. Indeed, for American women of the period, reading was often what Mary Kelley has called a “collective practice.”⁴¹ “The female culture of reading,” Sicherman writes, “fostered friendship and love, healing and learning, [and] . . . reinforced individual efforts at self-creation.”⁴²

Unlike the women described by Kelley and Sicherman, the narrator-reader of “The Yellow Wallpaper” is denied both peer-support and self-expression through writing. Since her enforced isolation makes reading her only activity, the desires stirred by her reading have no constructive outlet and are forced back upon themselves under the coercive conditions of the rest cure. By contrast, Gilman herself can be taken as another example of a nineteenth-century woman whose reading became a ground of constructive self-fashioning. If the interpretive conventions denounced by antifiction critics are in some sense analogous to those of Gilman’s narrator, the reading practices described by Sicherman and Kelley are in some sense analogous to Gilman’s own.

The story of Gilman as a reader does not end as disastrously as that of the narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” But it does not end as happily as Kelley’s narrative of “learned women” in antebellum America, or as Sicherman’s tales of “female heroism.” A lasting and little-noted consequence of Gilman’s “breakdown” (as she refers to it in her autobiography) was a permanent inability to read at all with any ease or pleasure. Her refurbished life and her enormous productivity as a writer and lecturer are all the more amazing in the light of this

enduring handicap. At one point in *The Living* Gilman attributes her "ruin" in part to "the rigid stoicism and constant effort in character-building of my youth; I was 'over-trained' and had wasted my substance in riotous—virtues" (L, 98). If Gilman's self-analysis is correct, she paid a heavy price for her renunciation of "wishing" and other imaginative outlets. Her lonely and rigorous attempts at self-shaping through "the power of ratiocination" may have contributed not only to significant achievement but also to inordinate pain.

Gilman's autobiography tells the story of a child who read "eagerly, greedily," a girl who "read steadily, with warm interest, in connected and scientific study," and a woman who "los[t] books out of [her] life" (L, 99, 100). "The Yellow Wallpaper" was written at a time when Gilman "could read nothing"; years later the effort to read still turned her mind into "boiled spinach" (L, 99). In this context the narrator's determination to "follow" the design of the wall-paper and make it cohere may also reflect Gilman's own desperate—and futile—struggles with printed matter during her most difficult days.

Feminist readings of Gilman's story have elided both the figure of the narrator as an isolated, fantasy-ridden reader and the figure of Gilman as a tormented one. It is worth bringing both of these images back into focus because "The Yellow Wallpaper" is informed by two contrasting and historically specific images of women reading: isolated, "addicted," and identifying with a phantom on the one hand; and capable, on the other, of "creative appropriations,"⁴³ which become the ground of far-reaching ambition (but, at least in Gilman's case, also of keen emotional stress).

"The Yellow Wallpaper" reflects the destructive consequences of solitary reading for purposes of escape and for the vicarious satisfactions of identification and merger. At the same time, the story, like Gilman's autobiography, attests to the "transformative potential" of reading. If Gilman's narrator fails to realize that potential, Gilman well knew that there were other women like herself who could do so, despite the price. Many of Gilman's readers in the late twentieth century have read "The Yellow Wallpaper" in that spirit, even if they have not always perceived the story's direct engagement with certain nineteenth-century reading practices—including Gilman's.

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Notes

I gave a short version of this essay at the Eighth Annual Conference of SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing) in Mainz, Germany, July 2000; and at the Third International Charlotte Perkins Gilman conference at the University of South Carolina in March 2001. I am grateful to the participants of both conferences for helpful suggestions.

- 1 Ann J. Lane, "The Fictional World of Charlotte Perkins Gilman," in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, ed. Lane (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), xi. In later years, Gilman read Whitman with pleasure; see *The Diaries of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, ed. Denise D. Knight (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 1994), 700, 703, 770.
- 2 See Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 121. Further references to this source will be cited parenthetically in the text as *L*.
- 3 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1899; reprint, New York: Feminist Press, 1973), 19. Further references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as "YW." When Gilman's story was first published in the *New England Magazine*, "wall-paper" was spelled both with and without the hyphen. Recent editions vary considerably in this respect. The edition that I use deletes it, and I have done so when citing from the text, or mentioning the title. Elsewhere I retain the hyphen because it puts an emphasis on the wall-paper as paper.
- 4 See Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850–1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 1997), 93.
- 5 Early in the story the narrator notes that she is sure the paper "knew what a vicious influence it had" ("YW," 16). In the words of one essay on "The Novel-Reading Habit," "When the confirmed novel-reader has an idle hour the craving for his customary dissipation seizes him. Not being conscious of the viciousness of his habit, he offers less resistance than the toper, and proceeds at once to indulge it" (George Clarke, "The Novel-Reading Habit," *Arena* 19 (May 1898): 675. Further references to this source will be cited parenthetically in the text as "NRH.")
- 6 Although as Glazener notes, "women were widely charged with addictive reading," men too were cautioned that excessive novel-reading could draw one away from the vital concerns of life (*Reading for Realism*, 310). For a challenge to the idea that nineteenth-century novels were mainly read by women, see Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), 156–179.
- 7 For readings of the story along these lines, see, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "From *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*," in *The Captive*

Imagination: A Casebook on "The Yellow Wallpaper," ed. Catherine Golden (New York: Feminist Press, 1992), 145–48; Annette Kolodny, "A Map for Rereading: Or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts," in *The Captive Imagination*, ed. Golden, 149–67; Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), 147–64. For a recent re-assessment of the way feminist literary studies have engaged the ideology of separate spheres, see Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70 (September 1998): 581–606.

- 8 To Gilbert and Gilman's tale represents "the story that all literary women would tell if they could": "Th[e] paper surrounds the narrator like an inexplicable text" ("From *The Madwoman in the Attic*," 145, 146). In Annette Kolodny's formulation, toward the end of the story the narrator is "totally surrendered to what is quite literally her own text—or rather her self as text" ("A Map for Rereading," 157).
- 9 Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 162.
- 10 In "First Steps toward a History of Reading," Robert Darnton proposes that insight into both readers and texts could be gained by "comparing readers' accounts of their experience with the protocols of reading" inscribed in literary works (*The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* [New York: Norton, 1989], 157.)
- 11 J. Henry Clark, *Sight and Hearing* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1856), 70; cited in Zboray, *A Fictive People*, 15. As another medical professional put it in 1862, "[T]here can be no question that excessive indulgence in novel-reading necessarily enervates the mind and diminishes its power of endurance" (Isaac Ray, *Mental Hygiene* [Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862]; cited in Daniel H. Borus, *Writing Realism: Howells, James, and Norris in the Mass Market* [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1989], 195). I do not mean to suggest that the narrator's "addictive" reading is the root of her problem; indeed, one might say that it is the narrator's "nervous weakness" that makes her fall prey to such practices. But there is no doubt that the narrator's preoccupation with the wall-paper further erodes her already fragile sense of reality and hastens her decline.
- 12 Popular genres proliferated toward the end of the century. Westerns, historical romances, temperance novels, detective fiction, ghost stories, and other popular modes flourished in the same literary marketplace as realist works and were often serialized in the same journals. (One of the most recent editions of "The Yellow Wallpaper" might profitably expand its section on "literary culture" to include a sampling of popular fiction and reviews; see *"The Yellow Wallpaper": A Bedford Cultural Edition*, ed. Dale M. Bauer [Boston: Bedford Books, 1998].) On the reception of "The Yellow Wallpaper," see Julie Bates Dock, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The*

Yellow Wallpaper” and the History of Its Publication and Reception (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1998).

- 13 The notion that fiction reading might stimulate “unreasonable” fantasies of social advancement through identification was the cause of much disapproval of fiction among educators and moralists from the eighteenth century onward (see Borus, *Writing Realism*, 29–30). Glazener notes that “the problem of literature’s becoming a substitute for reality . . . preoccupied [contributors to the] *Atlantic*” toward the end of the nineteenth century (*Reading for Realism*, 105–6). As Hjalmar Hjorth Boyeson writes in the *Forum*, “[I]f, while young, your thoughts move among [the] absurd and lurid unrealities [of romance], . . . you will be likely to tumble about like a blundering bat [when you return to] the daylight” (“The Great Realists and the Empty Storytellers,” *Forum* 18 [1894]: 724–25). For a discussion of the hostility to novel-reading in the early Republic, see Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 38–54.
- 14 “Most men,” Thoreau writes in *Walden*, “have learned to read to serve a paltry convenience. . . . yet this only is reading, in a high sense, not that which lulls us . . . and suffers the nobler faculties to sleep the while, but what we . . . devote our most alert and wakeful hours to” (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989], 104). That “wakeful” reading was associated with serious, generally male, and elitist pursuits can be clearly seen in the “On Reading” section of *Walden*, or in Melville’s review of Hawthorne’s *Mosses from an Old Manse*. The exclusionary emphasis of these texts may account for their recent disappearance from the *Norton Anthology of American Literature (Shorter Fifth Edition)*, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: Norton, 1999).
- 15 “The Reading Habit,” *Critic*, 30 July 1892, 60.
- 16 See George Philes, *How to Read a Book* (Printed for George P. Philes: New York, 1873); Charles Richardson, *The Choice of Books* (New York: American Book Exchange, 1881); and Noah Porter, *Books and Reading: What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?* (New York: Charles Scribners, 1872). Some commentators attacked the emphasis on purposive reading. In “The Vice of Reading,” Edith Wharton directed her irony against what she called “mechanical” readers encouraged by the notion of reading for improvement and social advancement (*North American Review*, July 1903, 513–21). See also Samuel McCord Crothers, “The Gentle Reader,” *Atlantic*, November 1900, 654–63; and Martha Dunn, “A Plea for the Shiftless Reader,” *Atlantic*, January 1901, 131–36.
- 17 Rare exceptions in *The Living* include fleeting references to Sir Walter Scott and *The Virginian* (*L*, 1, 93). Discussing her attempts to acquire “desirable traits” in her girlhood, Gilman refers to her project of imitating “some admired character in history or fiction.” But because, as she explains, she got only “as far as Socrates,” the “fiction” in question is cer-

tainly not the nineteenth-century novel (*L*, 59). Gilman's diary suggests that she read more fiction than she admits in her autobiography. During the 1880s and 1890s, she read fiction by James, Alcott, Dickens, Eliot, Fuller, Frederic, Phelps, Poe, Twain, and many others. In general, her references to fiction reading are extremely sparse and matter-of-fact. Occasionally, however, they reflect the strong ambivalence about the power of fiction to beguile or enthrall, which is under discussion here (see *The Diaries*, ed. Knight, 19, 37).

- 18 Lane, "Fictional World," xxxiv.
- 19 Gilman's ghost stories present the most serious challenge to the claim that Gilman's fiction "lead[s] us back to reality." Yet even "The Great Wisteria," one of Gilman's richest ghost stories, makes a forceful point about the stigma attached to unwed mothers. More obliquely and (for this reader) less successfully, "The Rocking Chair" engages gender relations through its focus on the desirability of "golden haired" girls.
- 20 Gilman, "The Girl with the Pink Hat," in *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*, ed. Lane, 39; further references to this story will be abbreviated as "G" and cited parenthetically in the text.
- 21 References to the narrator's covert writing appear throughout the first sections, stressing the narrator's "great relief" in communicating her ideas to "dead paper," though she has been "forbidden" to do so. Noting that she "did write for a while in spite of [her husband and brother]," the narrator admits that "it *does* exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it or else meet with heavy opposition" ("YW," 10). At one point she acknowledges that she has not "felt like writing" for some time; later she reasserts her belief that if she "were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas" ("YW," 13, 16). The first two sections end with a reminder that she writes in violation of her husband's orders: "There comes John and I must put this away—he hates to have me write a word"; "There's sister on the stairs!" ("YW," 13, 18). The narrator's writing is a pervasive motif for almost half of the narrative.
- 22 See Kolodny, "Map for Rereading," 156; and Richard Feldstein, "Reader, Text, Referentiality," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 276–77.
- 23 Susan Lanser points to the Gothic resonance of "The Yellow Wallpaper," linking the narrator's description of the house to that of the house in *Jane Eyre* ("Feminist Criticism, 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' and the Politics of Color in America," *Feminist Studies* 15 [fall 1989]: 427–28). On "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the Gothic, see also Lane, "Fictional World," xvii; and Robert Shulman, "Introduction," *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), xiv–vi.
- 24 Here again, the narrator's responses are typical of nineteenth-century reading practices generally. In representations of reading throughout the century, both professional and nonprofessional readers commonly used

- the trope of the book as a living thing—friend or foe. “Books are only makeshifts for men,” writes one commentator; or as Bronson Alcott puts it, “Good books . . . like living friends, have their voices and physiognomies, and their company is prized as old acquaintances” (quoted in Philes, *How to Read a Book*, 13; Alcott is cited in James Baldwin, *The Book-lover: A Guide to the Best Reading* [1884; reprint, Chicago: McClurg, 1898], 15). “In literature as in life one has a right to choose one’s own friends,” Martha Dunn remarks (“A Plea,” 136). Sometimes, to be sure, the idea of the animated text took a less idyllic form. For a graphic depiction of a book that talks back to its reader, see Robert Louis Stevenson’s fable “The Reader” (*Letters and Miscellanies of Robert L. Stevenson* [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901]), 473–74.
- 25 “*Delirium tremens*” is also the staple of another popular late-nineteenth-century fictional genre: the temperance novel (see, for example, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, “Temperance in the Bed of a Child: Incest and Social Order in Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Quarterly* 47 [March 1995]: 1–33).
- 26 Such readings suggest that the narrator comes to recognize desires that she has suppressed and aspects of her self and situation that she has failed to acknowledge (see Fetterley, “Reading about Reading”; Gilbert and Gubar, “From *Madwoman*”; Kolodny, “Map for Rereading”; and Lanser, “Feminist Criticism”).
- 27 Thomas Jefferson suggested in a letter that novel-reading could lead to a “bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life” (Jefferson to Nathaniel Burwell, 14 March 1818, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. A. A. Libscomb and A. E. Bergh [New York: Viking, 1984], 166).
- 28 Boyeson, “The Great Realists,” 724.
- 29 The image of the solitary reader has a long history. It played a role in the polemics of antifiction critics well before the nineteenth century and was taken up in the twentieth century by theorists of the novel like Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukacs, and Ian Watt. In 1977, J. Paul Hunter suggested that the novel is “naturally” an isolating medium (“The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Reader,” *Genre* 10 [winter 1977]: 456, 472, 478). Since then, Roger Chartier has proposed “the sociability of reading” as “a fundamental counterpoint to the privatization of the act of reading” (“Texts, Printings, Readings,” in *The New Cultural History*, ed. Lynn Hunt [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1989], 158). Elizabeth Long has challenged the “hegemonic picture of reading as a solitary activity” (“Textual Interpretation as Collective Action,” in *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993], 192). On nineteenth-century women’s reading in the United States as a shared activity, see Mary Kelley, “Reading Women/Women Reading: The Making of Learned Women in Antebellum America,” *Journal of American History* 83 (September 1996): 419–24.

- 30 Solitary reading can be seen from a different perspective, of course. "Private reading is already, in itself, an act of autonomy," Cora Kaplan writes. "[I]n turn it sets up, or enables space for reflective thought" ("*The Thorn Birds: Fiction, Fantasy, Femininity*," in *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* [London: Verso, 1986], 123); see also Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991), 90–94.
- 31 Fetterley, "Reading about Reading," 164.
- 32 Lanser, "Feminist Criticism," 420. Lanser challenges the preoccupation of feminist criticism with Gilman's narrator in order to isolate the story's emphasis on the color yellow and Gilman's anxiety about racial issues.
- 33 See Gilman, *The Living*, 30. Gilman also describes a visit to a ninety-nine-year-old woman who, when asked what she does with her time, answers: "I read nov-els. When I was young they would not let me read them, and now I read them all the time" (111).
- 34 On Gilman's renunciation of her "dream world," see *The Living*, 23. On Edith Wharton's childhood practice of "making up"—walking around the room telling stories aloud with a book in her hand, even before she had learned to read—see Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), 33–35.
- 35 Kelley, "Reading Women," 404–5. Sicherman emphasizes the "liberating" effect of reading for nineteenth-century women in "Sense and Sensibility: A Case Study of Women's Reading in Late Victorian America," in *Reading in America: Literary and Social History*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), 217.
- 36 Attempting to historicize Wolfgang Iser's construct of the "implied reader," Dimock suggests that "The Yellow Wallpaper" "implies" an educated, rational, authoritative woman reader who was "not quite real" in the 1890s. The "cultural work" of the story, Dimock claims, was precisely to bring this woman reader into being. But there were many kinds of women readers, including educated and critical ones, in late-nineteenth-century America (see Dimock, "Feminism, New Historicism, and the Reader," in *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*, ed. James L. Machor [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993], 85–106; Dimock's essay was originally published in *American Literature* 63 [December 1991]: 601–22). Moreover, as Kolodny notes, "The Yellow Wallpaper" does not exclude the male reader and can even be seen as directed toward making him a "better reader" ("Map for ReReading," 162). In *The Living*, Gilman emphasizes that "the real purpose of the story was to reach S. Weir Mitchell and convince him of the error of his ways" (121). To recognize this "purpose" of Gilman's is not to deny the story's feminist concerns.
- 37 Barbara Sicherman, "Sense and Sensibility," in *Reading in America*, ed. Davidson, 202.
- 38 "The Hamiltons of Fort Wayne, Indiana were an intensely and self-

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consciously literary family,” Sicherman writes. “Hamiltons of three generations were distinguished by their literary interests” (“Sense and Sensibility,” 202–3). Alice Hamilton became a doctor and the first woman on the medical faculty at Harvard; her sister Edith Hamilton is well known for her work on classical mythology.

- 39 Agnes Hamilton, diary entry, 31 July 1887; quoted in Sicherman, “Sense and Sensibility,” 207–8.
- 40 Reading aloud was a common practice in many middle-class families (see Sicherman, “Sense and Sensibility,” 206; and Kelley, “Reading Women,” 407). Gilman’s diaries provide ample evidence of the practice. On reading aloud in the family, and books as a ground of connection to others, see also Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “‘Have You Read . . .?’: Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52 (September 1997): 168–70; “Books, Reading, and the World of Goods in Antebellum New England,” *American Quarterly* 48 (December 1996): 599–600; and “Reading and Everyday Life in Antebellum Boston: The Diary of Daniel F. and Mary D. Child,” *Libraries and Culture* 32 (summer 1997): 288, 290–93. On reading aloud as a practice in antebellum literary societies for both black and white women, see Kelley, “Reading Women,” 420–21. On the organized, collective reading of Progressive-era women, see Theodora Penny Martin, *The Sound of Our Own Voices: Women’s Study Clubs 1860–1910* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), especially 85–116.
- 41 Kelley, “Reading Women,” 419.
- 42 Barbara Sicherman, “Reading and Ambition: M. Carey Thomas and Female Heroism,” *American Quarterly* 45 (March 1993): 79.
- 43 On the idea of reading as creative “appropriation,” see Chartier, “Texts, Printings, Readings,” 171. Sicherman suggests that imaginative identification allows a reader to occupy a variety of subject positions, crossing lines of gender and class, selectively appropriating what can be useful to the self (“Reading and Ambition,” 84–86). On multiple subject positions encouraged by reading, see also Cora Kaplan, “*The Thorn Birds*,” 130–31, 139, 142.

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