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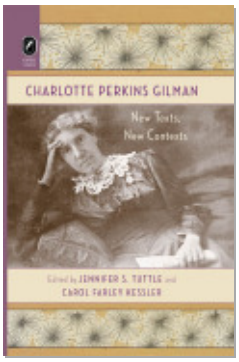
9. The Yellow Newspaper



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The Yellow Newspaper

*Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sensational Journalism**

SARI EDELSTEIN

In November 1909, Charlotte Perkins Gilman began publishing *The Forerunner,* the monthly periodical that she wrote and edited for the next seven years. Its mission, as she describes it, is to "stimulate thought; to arouse hope, courage and impatience"; and to "express ideas which need a special medium" ("As to Purpose"). She opens the first issue of *The Forerunner* with a poem in which she explicitly introduces her project as a response to an increasingly sensational press:

"THEN THIS"

The news-stands bloom with magazines,
    They flame, they blaze indeed;
So bright the cover-colors glow,
So clear the startling stories show,
So vivid their pictorial scenes,
    That he who runs may read.
Then This: It strives in prose and verse,
    Thought, fancy, fact, and fun,
To tell the things we ought to know,
To point the way we ought to go,

* A version of this essay originally appeared in *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 24.1 (2007): 72-92, published by the University of Nebraska Press. It is reproduced here by permission.

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So audibly to bless and curse,
That he who reads may run. (1–12)

In the first verse, Gilman describes the popular press almost exclusively in terms of its visual distinctiveness: the "news-stands bloom" and the "cover-colors glow." In the second verse, she distinguishes *The Forerunner* from these eye-catching magazines by emphasizing its artistic and literary substance, not its "startling stories." She hopes her periodical will incite readers to move forward in the "way we ought to go."

With the expression of these ambitions, Gilman defines her work against "yellow journalism," the term coined by a newspaper editor in 1897 to describe media practices that exploit, distort, or exaggerate the news.[1] With its "vivid pictorial scenes" and salacious stories, yellow journalism transformed the appearance of the nineteenth-century newspaper and intensified reporting practices that emerged with the penny presses of the 1830s. As a journalist and fiction writer, Gilman sought to expose an ideology of patriarchy and to create a female reading community that stood in staunch opposition to what she considered the menacing effects of the yellow press. From the first lines of her publication, it is clear that Gilman's founding of *The Forerunner* was an attempt to cultivate intellectual journalism at a moment when sensational newspapers and tabloids dominated the print marketplace.

Gilman's disdain for the contemporary newspaper stemmed from her concern with its corruption of print culture as well as from a more personal complaint against those who participated in and promoted the practice of sensational journalism. Several scholars have observed that Gilman took offense at the vicious reporting strategies of sensational newspaper writers. Lawrence Oliver and Gary Scharnhorst have examined Gilman's contempt for Ambrose Bierce, whose columns in the *San Francisco Examiner* in the early 1890s frequently included personal attacks on women journalists. According to Oliver and Scharnhorst, "Bierce scorned Gilman's effort to earn a reputation if not a living by her pen" (33). Similarly, Denise D. Knight has provided insight into Gilman's notoriously contentious relationship with newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst, whose reporters repeatedly exploited her as an object of scandal in the gossip columns of his newspapers. As Knight explains, Gilman's rigorous commitment to "ethical journalism" arose partly out of the treatment she received from the Hearst newspaper empire (46). On a broader level, Shelley Fisher Fishkin has written about Gilman's "lambast[ing] the press as a whole for managing to consistently miss or belittle the really important news of the day" (234). These scholars, among others, have illustrated the extent to which Gilman was critical of sensational

journalism. An advocate for the reformation of the press, Gilman sought to be taken seriously as a female journalist and to keep her private life out of the spectacle of sensationalism.

Given her well-documented personal and professional conflicts with contemporary newspaper culture, it is productive to read Gilman's fiction in terms of her concerns about the print marketplace. I will argue that Gilman's now canonical short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," published in 1892, draws much of its symbolic strength from the imagery and iconography of yellow journalism. Gilman's descriptions of the wallpaper throughout the text distinctly echo those used by the general public to describe the turn-of-the-century tabloid. Like the tabloid, it is yellow and sprawling, and the wallpaper is guilty of "committing every artistic sin" (13). As in her *Forerunner* poem, Gilman's emphasis on visual aesthetics in the story reflects the cultural preoccupation with the striking appearance of the sensational newspaper as well as its debasement of literary and artistic standards. Moreover, the narrator's vexed relationship to the wallpaper resembles Gilman's own relationship to the journalistic community.

Recent scholarship on Gilman has tended to deal primarily with her feminist and racial politics, both of which are crucial and explicit elements of her work. My reading of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" refocuses these discussions by investigating Gilman's simultaneous participation in and opposition to the popular print media industry. In reading the story in its cultural and biographical contexts, I am not seeking to reproduce what Susan Lanser has called the narrator's "relentless pursuit of a single meaning on the wall" (420). Rather, it is my intention to locate the story's politics more precisely within the media landscape of the late nineteenth century. By examining the reliance of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" on the cultural vocabulary of the newspaper world, I hope to establish the extent to which the literary marketplace influenced Gilman's work and to reveal more fully the joint pressures of genre and gender upon late-nineteenth-century writers.

Since its republication by the Feminist Press in 1973, Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" has achieved the status of a recovered classic. As such, the central narrative of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is by now familiar: An upper-class white woman is taken by her husband, a doctor, to a country estate to recover from what is presumably postpartum depression. Instructed to remain in bed, the woman becomes fixated with the yellow paper on the wall of the room to which she is confined and gradually envisions movement, and eventually a woman, behind its mesmerizing patterns. Critics have read the story as a critique of the cult of true womanhood, as an indictment of the medical establishment, and as a manifestation of Gilman's now well-docu-

mented nativism.[2] In this essay, I read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as revelatory of Gilman's anxiety about the cultural power of yellow journalism, which threatened her position as an author and a feminist and compromised her privacy and her reputation.

Though the term "yellow journalism" was not coined until at least 1897, sensational journalism emerged as a major trend in the 1880s with Joseph Pulitzer's purchase of *The New York World,* and members of the intellectual and literary communities criticized this new journalism as early as 1881.[3] As Joseph Campbell writes, "To be sure, yellow journalism did not simply burst upon the media landscape of the United States in the 1890s, unique and fully formed. It was malleable and it borrowed from past practice. . . . Yellow journalism was, as contemporaneous observers noted, born before it was baptized" (9). In other words, the hallmarks of yellow journalism—the emphasis on scandal, the massive headlines, the excessive illustration—were operative in the print media before the inception of the term. Moreover, throughout the mid-nineteenth century, the color yellow was associated with the "publication of cheap sensational literature, particularly in yellow-covered pamphlets" (Reynolds 183).[4] Thus, even though the term "yellow journalism" was most likely not part of the vernacular in the early 1890s when Gilman was writing the story, yellowness did connote tabloid-style writing and cheap paper, and the newspaper was already changing the cultural landscape in dramatic ways. The rise of yellow journalism was in part a function of technological innovation, as changes in print technology in the 1870s and 1880s allowed for enormous increases in production and circulation. Most significantly, wood-pulp stock, which yellowed with age, replaced the more expensive fiber crops as the principal source for newsprint, and improvements in typesetting diminished costs and turned the newspaper into a cheap commodity available for the first time to a widespread readership. As the newspaper developed as a mass medium, it also emerged as a serious commercial enterprise and attracted entrepreneurs who began to consider it a potentially lucrative pursuit. Chief among the businessmen who exploited the profitability of the press were Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, whose dueling papers, the *New York World* and the *New York Journal,* epitomized the tendency toward sensationalism. In their bid to win readers, editors for these papers, and others throughout the nation, incorporated illustrations, cartoons, and human-interest stories. By the end of the 1880s, as Ted C. Smythe writes, "the Pulitzer news style had been set. . . . [T]he *[New York] World's* make up would change over time, but the emphasis on pathos, sex, and crime dominated the newspaper, front page and inside" (13). Sensationalism became characteristic of the substance and style of many

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daily newspapers, and readers purchased them in direct proportion to their inflated and exaggerated headlines and pictures.

The popularity of the commercial daily newspaper posed a significant threat to serious fiction. While the majority of newspapers published short fiction, and thus encouraged the expansion and professionalization of fiction writing, editors and syndicate managers also severely hampered artistic freedom. As the press found success through its invasive and penetrating style, so the editors commissioned and sought out fiction that likewise satisfied a public desire for sensational, fast-paced stories. Thus, while many late-nineteenth-century authors relied upon newspapers to bring their work into print and to gain public recognition, the merging of literary and financial concerns "left little room for genuine personal artistic autonomy," let alone for political messages such as Gilman's (Johanningsmeier 28). While some novelists, such as William Dean Howells, Ambrose Bierce, and Stephen Crane, located themselves within the newspaper establishment, others were apprehensive and even resentful about its increasing influence over the reading public. Henry James, for example, was hostile to the newspaper, which he felt threatened his livelihood and reputation. His 1886 novel, *The Bostonians,* refers to the "penetralia of the daily press," characterizing the press as a domineering, invasive masculine organ (82).

Gilman would have agreed. Like James and many of her contemporaries, she was disgusted with the rise of the intrusive, money-driven newspaper culture. However, Gilman, unlike James, was also invested in the mass media, both to support herself financially and to cultivate a female reading community, and consequently, she could not wholly disregard the newspapers or periodicals even as she found fault with the transformation of print culture. As a cultural critic, Gilman was candid about her commitment to artistic and intellectual standards, and the narrator in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" seems to be a spokesperson for these views. The narrator's initial response to the wallpaper is a judgment about its artistic shortcomings: "I never saw worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin" (13). As the first opinion she provides about the wallpaper, this statement reveals the narrator's attachment to conservative artistic principles. Her very use of the word "paper," a shorthand term for newspaper even in Gilman's day, also invokes the connection between the wallpaper and the popular press. Later in the story, she makes a similar assessment of the wallpaper's aesthetics, noting, "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" (20). Thus, the wallpaper is aesthetically disorganized and confusing, and its frenzied design represents a break from the straight-

forward, instructive patterns with which the narrator is familiar.

The narrator's critique of the wallpaper distinctly resembles the complaints about the state of the press made by contemporary cultural critics, who often pointed to the newspaper's appearance as particularly objectionable. In 1886, an article in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* reads: "Pick up any single one of our large dailies, and, glancing over its columns, see if you can escape this contamination. . . . [W]herever your eyes fall you will find the narrative of some loathsome deed, spiced, and peppered with the most abject sensationalism" (Pallen 470). And the *Overland Monthly* included an equally critical account: "The spicy details of a divorce, or the sickening particulars of a murder, are spread out over a column, illustrated by pictures whose artistic deficiencies constitute them an abuse of the liberty of the press" (Smith 474). That these writers were especially dismayed by the "artistic deficiencies" of the newspaper links them with Gilman's narrator, who finds the same fault in the wallpaper. Such condemnations of the newspaper were rampant throughout the 1880s, even before the coinage of "yellow journalism." In fact, in 1900, when Delos Wilcox conducted an extensive study of the American newspaper, he identified yellow journalism by the same features that critics had deplored in the newspaper since the 1880s: its disregard for artistic quality and its unique visual markers. Wilcox notes,

> One of the characteristic methods of yellow journalism is to prostitute the headlines to an unworthy function, either by making them unduly prominent and thus forcing attention or by making them exaggerate or misrepresent the contents of dispatches. . . . The reader of the daily papers is often at a loss to give any connected account of the course of important events simply because he has had a rapid series of vague and conflicting impressions from hastily looking over the headings of the daily dispatches. (88)

The narrator's description of the wallpaper resembles Wilcox's descriptions of the yellow newspaper to a striking extent. Like Wilcox, she emphasizes the effects of the visual presentation upon the viewer: "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). Like Wilcox, Gilman's narrator stresses the visual disorientation of the wallpaper. The "eye" is literally confused by trying to follow the simultaneously pronounced and uncertain curves of the pattern. Also like Wilcox, the narrator focuses on the irregular and contradictory quality of her paper. Gilman's narrator sees

"unheard of contradictions" in the wallpaper, just as Wilcox notes that the yellow journals employ huge headlines that lead to "vague and conflicting impressions." These "contradictions" also recall the yellow newspaper's reputation for slanderous, unsubstantiated stories, just as the "outrageous angles" in the wallpaper call to mind the embellished tales of murder and intrigue that abounded in the yellow press. Moreover, Gilman's narrator notes, "The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction" (20). Its horizontal layout suggests the wallpaper's likeness to print, but unlike standard print documents, the wallpaper's order is chaotic and hard to follow, much like the layout of a sensational newspaper.

When read against contemporaneous accounts of the effects of the popular press upon readers, the narrator's supposed insanity looks much like an exaggeration of the typical response to yellow journalism. After all, her disorientation, her frenzy, and her obsession are linked to her preoccupation with a problematic, disjointed paper, and many cultural commentators linked sensational newspapers to nervous breakdowns and intellectual stagnation.[5] In 1886, Augustus Levey of the *North American Review* argued that the contemporary sensational newspaper induced a "mild form of mania which needs regulation and control as much as other petty vices of human nature" (308). Wilcox called yellow journalism "pathological, a social vice the consequences of which are very grave" (76).[6] And in a much more recent description of the late-nineteenth-century newspaper, Alan Trachtenberg writes, "The big-city press, then, crystallized the cultural predicament [Frederick] Olmsted discovered in the commercial street: the condition of isolation and nervous calculation" (125). Indeed, nervousness is the principal symptom for which the narrator in "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is undergoing the rest cure. In this light, the story is a kind of cautionary tale for the culture; it warns readers to avoid the "pointless patterns" of the newspaper in order to remain sane and rational thinkers.

Significantly, Gilman's use of wallpaper as a figure for newspaper has historical antecedents. During the Civil War, a paper shortage necessitated the printing of Confederate newspapers on wallpaper.[7] For instance, during the summer of 1863, numerous editions of the *Vicksburg Daily Citizen* were printed on wallpaper. Conversely, newspapers have also been used as wallpaper, to provide insulation and even decoration, since at least the mid-nineteenth century in the United States. Given the existing cultural linkages of the wallpaper and the newspaper, Gilman's use of the wallpaper as a symbol for the press would have been even more recognizable for her original readership.

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While my understanding of the wallpaper as visually and figuratively tied to the sensational newspaper is a departure from the previous readings of this central symbol, it also contributes to and engages with the work scholars have done to historicize the story. Susan S. Lanser and subsequent scholars have asserted that the wallpaper is reflective of Gilman's nativism. Certainly the "smouldering unclean yellow" of the wallpaper echoes the anti-Chinese racism of the late nineteenth century, and yet the fact that the paper is "strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight" also calls to mind a newspaper left too long in the sun. The connection between these historical resonances lies in the newspaper's affiliation with and reliance on immigrants. After all, the very term "yellow journalism" was based upon a racist caricature that circulated as a newspaper cartoon. Drawn by Richard Outcault, the "Yellow Kid" was an Irish-American street urchin who wore an oversized yellow shirt. The newspaper, in its dissemination of this particular image as well as numerous others like it, was not only complicit with, but instrumental in creating, a racial anxiety that dominated the 1880s and 90s. And Gilman, who has been called a "eugenic feminist," would have associated the popular press with the poor, the "grotesque," and the "yellow" and with the corruption of the nation.[8]

But beyond jeopardizing Gilman's nativist fantasy of America, the sensational newspaper also imperiled her position as a professional writer. Changes in the substance and style of newspapers heavily influenced magazines and periodicals, which were major venues for new fiction and editorials. Sensational newspapers stimulated readers' interest in the dark side of human experience, and magazines, with the exception of a handful of highbrow periodicals, catered to the public demand for insubstantial, and often lurid, human-interest stories. Moreover, magazines, like newspapers, became increasingly dependent on advertisers, and editors often chose content that would satisfy their business interests rather than their intellectual or artistic aims. To ensure publication, some writers went so far as to endorse specific consumer goods in their fiction. Writers like Gilman, whose stories did not appeal to advertisers or to a popular reading audience, were forced either to compromise their writing or risk not being published. Of her brief attempt to support herself as a writer for a newspaper syndicate, Gilman writes, "[T]hough I tried my best to reach and hold the popular taste, I couldn't do it, so after a year that effort came to an end" (*Living* 310).

Given that Gilman occupied such a precarious position within the literary and journalistic spheres, it is useful to consider her representation of the story's narrator as a writer. We learn early on in the story that the text we are reading is her journal, a literary endeavor of some sort. She makes this clear

on the first page, in which she confides in a parenthetical note, "I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind" (19). Here, the narrator makes the important distinction that the paper upon which she writes is "dead paper." While "dead paper" contrasts most clearly with "living soul," one might also read the characterization of paper as "dead" in another way: if some paper is "dead," then perhaps other paper is implicitly "alive." In the context of Gilman's relationship to journalists and her difficulty in publishing her work, one might deduce that the paper that is alive is the newspaper, the paper that rules Gilman's life, sets fire to her reputation, and pushes her out of print. By contrast, Gilman's feminist work, like her narrator's journal, is "dead," lacking both audience and venue. As Conrad Shumaker notes, "[The narrator's] occasional use of 'you,' her questions[,] . . . and her confidential tone all suggest that she is attempting to reach or create the listener she cannot otherwise find" (593). The narrator's acknowledgment so early on in the story that her paper is "dead" foregrounds Gilman's own concern with reception, with audience, and with the power of her language.

In the story, the narrator has a room of her own, but she is not permitted to write in it; in fact, her room—dominated by both the yellow paper and the watchful patriarchy—becomes the space that prohibits, rather than enables, literary production. As she confides, "I did write for a while in spite of them; but it does exhaust me a good deal—having to be so sly about it, or else meet with heavy opposition" (10). One way to read the "heavy opposition" to which the narrator refers is in the context of the sensational news empire, which was an oppositional force that Gilman found especially frustrating in the years surrounding the dissolution of her first marriage. Following her separation from her husband Charles Walter Stetson in 1887, Gilman found herself the subject of gossip columns and sensational news stories.[9] The press's interest in exposing the details of Gilman's divorce outraged her, and she vehemently sought to remove herself from the media limelight. In her autobiography, Gilman recounts an episode in which a reporter from Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner* attempts to interview her for details of her divorce. As she explains, "I saw him, told him the simple facts, that there was no 'story.' . . . The result was a full page in the *Examiner,* with interviews from various members of the P.C.W.P.A. [Pacific Coast Women's Press Association] on the topic 'Should Literary Women Marry.'" This very headline elucidates the media as a patriarchal tool that regulated gender by subjecting literary women to public scrutiny. Following this incident, Gilman was a frequent target of the press; as she put it, "My name became a football for all the papers on the coast" (*Living* 143). These events in her private life

occurred as she was finishing and attempting to publish "The Yellow Wall-Paper."[10]

In the context of Gilman's experiences with the press, the story's vilification of paper can be seen as a professional critique of the newspaper industry as well as a personal and feminist response to her own exploitation. As the narrator explains of the wallpaper, "You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well underway in following, it turns a back-somersault and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you" (25). The resemblance between the press's treatment of Gilman and the wallpaper's effect upon the narrator suggest that Gilman was deeply concerned, early on in her career, with making and preserving a name for herself in a hostile professional world that judged her according to a harsh double standard. That the narrator initially visualizes more than one woman behind the wallpaper makes sense in light of the fact that Gilman herself was represented in various inaccurate ways by the newspapers. As Denise Knight writes, "Despite her repeated failures to cooperate with the press, or perhaps because of it, Gilman continued to find herself the subject of new stories" (50–51). Similarly, the narrator explains, "Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one. . . . And she is trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern—it strangles so: I think that is why it has so many heads" (30). The many heads of the woman behind the wallpaper might mirror the various representations of Gilman constructed by the press, and the fact that she is strangled points to the fact that the press has not only multiplied and invented versions of her but it has also muted and silenced her.

Gilman's portrayal of wallpaper may also offer an indictment of the intensifying culture of mass publicity, a culture to whose assent the newspaper was instrumental. In its unyielding surveillance of the narrator, the wallpaper resembles the prying, intrusive gaze of reporters, photographers, and even novelists. As the narrator observes, "This paper looks to me as it if knew what a vicious influence it had! . . . Those absurd blinking eyes are everywhere" (16). This characterization of the wallpaper as something watching and scrutinizing her, links it to the probing, omnipresent media of the late nineteenth century. In an 1881 lecture, Charles Dudley Warner asserted, "Almost everybody talks about the violation of decency and the sanctity of private life by the newspaper in the publication of personalities and the gossip of society" (281). In relentlessly compromising the narrator's privacy, the wallpaper signals the disintegration of private domestic space and the dominance of a technologically driven obsession with publicity.[11] In response to the "hovering," "skulking" presence of the wallpaper, the narra-

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tor attempts to preserve her privacy, and she becomes increasingly paranoid about sharing the details of her life with the reader (28–29). Once eager to write and confide her thoughts, the narrator becomes secretive and private. Near the end of the narrative, she writes, "I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much" (31). In stark contrast with the narrator's earlier confessional tone, she becomes aware that her most private sentiments can easily be exploited and distorted, much like Gilman's own personal life. Near the end of the story, she writes, "To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise. . . . Besides I wouldn't do it. Of course not. I know well enough that a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" (34–35). The narrator's wariness about her behavior being "misconstrued" resembles Gilman's own fear of being exposed, injuriously, by the press.[12] Moreover, that it is the narrator's contemplation of literally throwing herself outside of the domestic realm that causes her to worry about being deemed improper calls to mind the criticism that Gilman herself received for being a mother who maintained such a public professional existence.

In light of her personal and professional relationship to sensational journalism, we might read Gilman's portrayal of the wallpaper, and the narrator's relationship to it, as the first of the many critiques she made of the yellow press throughout her career. In a 1906 poem called "The Yellow Reporter," Gilman gives a harsh denunciation of yellow journalism:

> Under the Press Power great and wide
> Their unsigned slanders cower and hide
> From outraged Justice they slink behind
> Shadowy Companies false and blind.[13] (*Later* 46)

Here, she takes issue with journalists for publishing lies under pseudonyms that allow them to "cower and hide" instead of facing potential lawsuits for libel or defamation. That the ethical and intellectual deterioration of the press was a source of concern for Gilman is clear. But what is perhaps more significant is that, in describing the yellow journalists, she uses precisely the same terms—"slink behind" and "cower and hide"—that the narrator uses to describe the yellow wallpaper, terms that reveal the profound impact of the newspaper culture on her fiction.

If we read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as a comment on contemporary journalism, its feminist implications extend beyond the rest cure and the medical establishment: the story seems, instead, to be principally concerned with women's relationship to print culture. We might recall that, as Paula

Treichler has pointed out, "the central issue in this particular story [is] the narrator's alienation from work, writing, and intellectual life" (62). This alienation intensifies as the story progresses, and Gilman underscores the detrimental effects of the wallpaper, in particular, upon the narrator's productivity as an author. The more energy the narrator exhausts attempting to make sense of the wallpaper, the less inclination she has to write. "I don't know why I should write this. I don't want to. I don't feel able. . . . The effort is getting to be greater than the relief" (21). Later, she writes, "It's getting to be a great effort for me to think straight" (21). The narrator's struggle for coherence manifests itself in the story, her journal, which does become increasingly disjointed and unclear as it progresses.

Critics have read the narrator's detachment from her own writing as the result of her controlling husband and the rest cure he administers. Indeed, the relationship between the narrator and John has long been read as symbolic of the gender inequalities that characterized both the medical and marital institutions of the 1890s. With his exclusive rights to diagnose and interpret, John serves as a marker for patriarchy's monopoly on a variety of discursive practices. In their influential study, *The Madwoman in the Attic,* Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as a text that centrally concerns a woman writing herself out of patriarchy's representation of her. For Gilbert and Gubar, the woman behind the wallpaper is the narrator's feminine subjectivity, imprisoned by a misogynistic society's misrepresentations. Their reading provides an important way of understanding the wallpaper as a metaphor for patriarchal oppression, and yet the metaphor can be extended even further. By reading the wallpaper as a newspaper, we can localize the "patriarchal text." Gilman's depiction of the narrator as oppressed and dominated by the wallpaper is not only symbolic of her own oppression by a patriarchal society, but more specifically, the narrator's fraught engagement with the wallpaper enables a consideration of the press as a crucial player in the misrepresentation of Gilman and her female contemporaries. Moreover, by placing the story within the context of the late-nineteenth-century media industry, we can read the narrator's relationship to John as structurally analogous to Gilman's relationship with the mass media. As someone who asks the narrator "all sorts of questions," John may represent not just medicine but the mass media, which also maintained a right to interrogate and interpret women's texts, bodies, and lives (32).

In its depiction of a woman lacking both privacy and intellectual autonomy, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" prefigures *Women and Economics,* Gilman's provocative 1898 study of the economic relations between the sexes. In *Women and Economics,* she writes, "For the woman there is, first, no free

production allowed; and, second, no relation maintained between what she does produce and what she consumes. . . . Thus we have painfully and laboriously evolved and carefully maintain among us an enormous class of non-productive consumers" (117). While not solely responsible for the evolution of women into a "class of non-productive consumers," the newspapers and magazines of the 1880s and 1890s certainly contributed to this change in female reading and spending habits. According to Christopher Wilson, magazines and newspapers contributed directly to the rise of a consumer culture that glorified homemaking and encouraged women to identify with consumer products. For Gilman, who sought to bind together a female reading community through her publications, women's susceptibility to the mass media and particularly to media representations of ideal womanhood, was troublesome and threatening. We might recognize Gilman's frustration with the dissolution of the female reading community in "The Yellow Wall-Paper," in which the narrator's isolation is one of the most startling, and perhaps maddening, aspects of the story for both the reader and for the narrator herself. Early on, the narrator writes, "It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work" (16). Her lack of intellectual companionship is particularly discouraging because the only other female character, Jennie, her husband's sister, aligns herself with the medical/male establishment and does not seem to sympathize or identify with the narrator. As the narrator explains, Jennie "hopes for no better profession" than housekeeping and nursing (18). Jennie even adopts some of John's strategies; she interrogates and monitors the narrator: "I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give" (32). With Jennie as a reporter and her husband as an interpreter, or editor, the narrator becomes the subject of a panoptic, invasive journalistic investigation.

To unite women and to combat the male-dominated press, Gilman relied heavily on speeches and nonfiction, which she published in a variety of journals, including several of which she herself edited—among them *The Impress, The Californian,* and finally *The Forerunner.* Through these publications, Gilman sought to rouse women readers to consider their place in a patriarchal society. While she did write fiction, Gilman was committed to being taken seriously as a social critic, not an artist. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin writes, "Didactic to the core, both journalism and fiction were for Gilman what she once called 'writing for a purpose'" (236). Her mission was to create a space for rational-critical debate and intellectualism in an age that placed greater value on scandal and gossip. "The Yellow Wall-Paper" itself was written expressly for the purpose of putting an end to Weir Mitchell's

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rest cure, and she claimed in various memoirs that the treatment was altered subsequent to the story's publication.[14]

However, it is clear that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" poses a less effective challenge to other kinds of patriarchal authority. While I have sought to demonstrate the resemblances between the wallpaper and the contemporary newspaper and suggested that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" might offer a prescient critique of yellow journalism, it is necessary to reconcile such a reading with the story's obvious debt to sensationalism. Although Gilman sought throughout her career to undermine the popular press, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" represents less a break with sensationalism than a seeming submission to its form and style. That is, even as the descriptions of the wallpaper and its effects upon the narrator operate as a condemnation of sensational journalism, the story itself borrows from the very practices it seems to reject. When "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was published in *The New England Magazine* in 1892, many reviews expressed both discomfort and fascination with its sensational elements. One reader, whose letter was published in *The Boston Transcript,* wrote: "It is graphically told, in a somewhat sensational style, which makes it difficult to lay aside, after the first glance, till it is finished, holding the reader in morbid fascination to the end" (*Living* 120). Similarly, an anonymous 1899 review published in *Time and the Hour* called the story "a well-done, horrible book,—a book to keep away from the young wife" (Dock 108). And H. E. Scudder, then editor of *The Atlantic Monthly,* refused to publish "The Yellow Wall-Paper," claiming, "I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I have made myself!" (*Living* 119). It is difficult to ignore the similarities between these responses to "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and the charges made against yellow journalism and sensational writing more generally.

Given Gilman's explicit commitment to instructive literature and the realist nature of most of her short fiction, the chilling and sensational features of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" are both puzzling and anomalous. And while Gilman did compare her story to those of Poe, she also maintained "The Yellow Wall-Paper" was "no more 'literature' than my other stuff, definitely being written 'with a purpose'" (*Living* 121). Critics have tended to explain the sensational elements of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" by assimilating them into Gilman's feminism. For example, Carol Davison reads the story as an example of the female gothic, and she sees Gilman using the gothic genre as a means of "renovating an extremely popular and well-established house of fiction" (49). While it may be tempting to read "The Yellow Wall-Paper" as gothic, such a classification does not resolve the paradox between the story's form and Gilman's aesthetic and intellectual goals. Instead of categorizing the

novel as gothic or as sensational, a distinction made virtually impossible by what Dana Luciano has called the "slipperiness of the boundary between the two genres," it is significant that Gilman's techniques were clearly in marked contrast with the kinds of writing she claimed to value (315).

Recalling the conditions under which Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper" is useful in explaining its generic location as well as the discrepancy between readers' assessments of the story and Gilman's own understanding of it. In her autobiography, Gilman recounts a conversation with Theodore Dreiser, then an editor of *The Delineator,* who advised her to "consider more what editors want." In response to this suggestion, Gilman writes, "If one writes to express important truths, needed yet unpopular, the market is necessarily limited" (*Living* 304). Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper" shortly after her separation from Charles Walter Stetson, during the first years in which she was responsible for supporting herself financially, and was consequently more reliant than ever on the market.[15] While she sought to carve out a new genre, a sex-neutral discourse, to accomplish her political and reformist goals, Gilman certainly also felt pressure to produce something profitable.[16] Perhaps this tension between her ambition to "express important truths" and her need to make a living manifests itself in the increasing pressure of the wallpaper on the narrator. In the narrator's conflicted response to the wallpaper, we might see Gilman's own ambivalence about adopting a sensational style.

In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," sensational writing is explicitly linked to women, as the narrator is presumed to have an "imaginative power and a habit of story-making" (15). However, Gilman draws attention to the faultiness of this assumption, and its implied expectation that women's intellectual projects must be fanciful and creative, by depicting the narrator's relationship to the wallpaper as supremely rational and, at times, almost empirical; she seeks to "follow the pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion" (19). By foregrounding this misconception about the nature of the narrator's intellect, Gilman seems committed to refuting the notion that women are whimsical story makers. However, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" itself, in spite of its feminist subtext, does not signify a challenge to the notion of gendered genres. The narrator's simultaneous repulsion by and attraction to the wallpaper's pattern seems to imitate Gilman's own implication in a literary economy that was both saturated in sensation and committed to preserving genre distinctions based on gender. As Walter Benn Michaels has argued, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" neither "criticizes [n]or endorses the culture of consumption. . . . [I]t *exemplifies* that culture" (27). Though I do read the story as an indictment of sensational journalism, the wallpaper's ultimate enfolding of the

narrator into its chaotic pattern mirrors what I see as Gilman's inability to extricate herself from the market and the discursive practices it demanded. Rather than an absolute triumph over the wallpaper, then, the story's ending reveals the force of material conditions—which not only prevent the narrator from true liberation but also prevent Gilman herself from completely abandoning the generic practices she disdained.

The story's reliance on sensationalism might represent the way in which the literary marketplace tended to dictate women's authorial decisions, particularly decisions of genre. Louisa May Alcott, for example, also wrote crowd-pleasing sensational stories for their financial rewards, and like Gilman, she portrayed her struggle with the market in her fiction, most clearly with the character of Jo March in *Little Women* (1869). Upon realizing their market potential, Jo anonymously publishes several gothic-inflected stories in the *Weekly Volcano* until Professor Bhaer, a spokesman for artistic integrity, prompts her to realize that her stories "are trash. . . . [E]ach is more sensational than the last. . . . I've gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money" (280). Subsequently, Jo turns back to didactic fiction for which she can find no publisher. Thus, we might remember that genre may be less an artistic choice than a financial one, and perhaps Gilman, along with her narrator, had to succumb to "The Yellow Wall-Paper" before she could align her aesthetics with her politics.[17]

In its form as well as in its central narrative, "The Yellow Wall-Paper" foregrounds competition among professional, political, and popular discourses, and as I have argued, the rise of yellow journalism exacerbated this discursive struggle through its influence on the literary marketplace. By catering to the burgeoning consumer culture's demand for fast-paced, scandal-driven stories, sensational journalism regulated literary production as well as gender, and Gilman was only one of many writers whose artistic and political ambitions did not always correspond to these public demands. As we continue to understand Gilman as a feminist, we must also consider her as a professional writer whose works can be read as an extended meditation on female authority and the fate of socially conscious writing in the turn-of-the-century print marketplace.

NOTES

1. There has been some critical controversy over the date of the coinage of the phrase. Mark Winchester makes a case for 1898 in "The Yellow Kid and the Coining of 'Yellow Journalism.'" Joseph Campbell argues that journalist Ervin Wardman coined the term in 1897, three months after the Yellow Kid rivalry began.

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2. On Gilman's nativism, see Seitler; chapter 4 of Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917 (*Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 121–69; and Alys Eve Weinbaum's *Wayward Reproductions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3. In 1881, Charles Dudley Warner gave a lecture entitled "The American Newspaper," in which he examined the decline of the newspaper as a symptom of its increasing status as a business enterprise.

4. Also, beginning in the late 1880s, Charles Scribner and Sons began their Yellow Paper Series, in which they published popular literature, including works by Joel Chandler Harris and George Washington Cable, in yellow covers.

5. It was not only the reading of newspapers that supposedly led to these intellectual and psychological consequences. As Barbara Hochman has pointed out, the narrator's response to the wallpaper also bears resemblance to what were considered the pernicious effects of reading certain types of popular fiction. She writes, "If we imagine the wall-paper as a fictional text—sometimes dull and repetitive but also flamboyant, outrageous, self-contradictory, and repellant—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" (96).

6. Charles Mellvaine similarly called the "newspaper-habit a vicious foe to concentration of thought [and] highly pernicious to consecutive thinking" (278).

7. The American Antiquarian Society holds a small collection of these wallpaper-newspapers. For more information on these newspapers, see Clarence S. Brigham's essay, "Wall-paper Newspapers of the Civil War," in *Bibliographical Essays, A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames (*Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924): 203–09.

8. I am borrowing the term "eugenic feminism" from Dana Seitler, who uses it to refer to the ideological conflation of the racial purity movement with feminism at the turn of the century.

9. In her autobiography, Gilman writes, "Finally, in the fall of '87, in a moment of clear vision, we agreed to separate, to get a divorce" (*Living* 96).

10. In her essay on Gilman's relationship with William Randolph Hearst, Denise Knight notes that Gilman's earliest encounter with a Hearst paper occurred in the fall of 1892 (47).

11. In 1890, the same year that Gilman wrote "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren published "The Right to Privacy" in the *Harvard Law Review.* In it, they argue: "Instantaneous photographs and newspaper enterprise have invaded the sacred precincts of private and domestic life; and numerous mechanical devices threaten to make good the prediction that 'what is whispered in the closet shall be proclaimed from the house-tops'" (202).

12. Throughout her life, Gilman expressed her fear of being exposed by the press. In a letter written to Houghton Gilman in 1899, she articulated her anxiety about newspapers sensationalizing her private life: "You ought to know that there is the possibility of such letters being dragged out some day. . . . There is more than one person on earth who could make things very unpleasant for me if they tried. . . . [Y]ou must consider the disagreeable practical possibilities like this. Fancy San Francisco papers with a Profound Sensation in Literary Articles! Revelations of a Peculiar Past! Mrs. Stetson's Love Affair with a Woman. Is this Friendship! and so on" (Gilman, *Journey* 246). I am indebted to

Gill Frank for bringing this reference to my attention.

13. This particular poem, titled "The Yellow Reporter," was unpublished during Gilman's lifetime. It is dated 1906.

14. In the October 1913 issue of *The Forerunner,* Gilman wrote of the story: "It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" ("Why" 19–20). She repeated her claim about the story's effectiveness in her autobiography. After hearing that Dr. Mitchell had changed his treatment since reading "The Yellow Wall-Paper," she writes, "If this is a fact, I have not lived in vain" (*Living* 121). Though no evidence has been found to corroborate this claim, it is significant that Gilman chose to emphasize her story's efficacy in subsequent publications.

15. Shortly after the story's publication, Gilman wrote a letter to *The New England Magazine* asking whether or not they planned to pay her. She writes, "I never got a cent for it till later publishers brought it out in book form, and very little then. . . . All these literary efforts providing but little, it was well indeed that another avenue of work opened to me at this time" (*Living* 121).

16. In 1891, during the same period in her life, Gilman also published "The Giant Wistaria," a short ghost story.

17. While the majority of Gilman's fiction is straightforward and instructive, her recently published novel, *Unpunished,* is steeped in the conventions of the murder mystery. Like "The Yellow Wall-Paper," *Unpunished* was written at a point in Gilman's life when financial concerns seemed to have outweighed aesthetic and political considerations.

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