



THERE, AS USUAL, WAS EDELSON DELIVERING
HIS POST-STRUCTURALIST ANALYSIS OF THE
MODERN NOVEL TO THE PRIVILEGED FEW

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Sexual difference

John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that in marriage.

John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures.

John is a physician, and *perhaps* — (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) — *perhaps* that is one reason I do not get well faster.

You see he does not believe I am sick! (9–10)

This passage from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) presents a number of important issues concerning sexual difference. In particular it dramatizes conventional presuppositions about the differences between men and women. The phrase 'of course' may signal that the first sentence is satirical and ironic, but the implication remains: a woman is subordinate to her husband and cannot expect to be taken seriously. The differences between men and women, in this passage, are primarily a matter of recognizing certain kinds of gender stereotypes. Such stereotypes depend to a considerable extent on a conceptual opposition: man versus woman. And, like other binary oppositions, this involves a hierarchy. John, the man, is active, 'practical', dominant, unemotional. The narrator, the woman, appears to be passive, non-practical, subordinate, emotional. The opposition between the man and the woman is underscored by the insistent stress on the man's actions, qualities and characteristics (John does this, John is such-and-such) and the corresponding *absence* of information regarding the woman. *The Yellow Wallpaper* has become something of a modern classic as regards

the literary representation of women and the idea of what Elaine Showalter has called, in a book of that name, 'A Literature of Their Own'.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a first-person narrative which tells the story of a woman whose husband insists that, because she is ill, she must remain confined in a room with revolting yellow wallpaper in a large old house where they are staying for the summer. The woman narrates the frightening process whereby she comes to believe that there is some *other* woman in the room, a woman behind or inside the wallpaper. The text culminates with the demonic turn by which she has *become* the woman behind the wallpaper but has got out. The husband comes into the room to discover his wife creeping around the walls: 'Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!' (36)

The Yellow Wallpaper offers a particularly striking example of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar talk about as 'the madwoman in the attic' (Gilbert and Gubar 1979). The story is a dramatic and powerfully ironic account of how a woman is repressed, confined and ultimately driven crazy, specifically by her husband, but more generally by the violence of patriarchy. It is no coincidence, therefore, that *The Yellow Wallpaper* should have been written by a woman known in her own lifetime for her contribution to the women's movement in the United States and, in particular, for her work of non-fiction, *Women and Economics* (1898). *The Yellow Wallpaper* can be read as a powerful satire on patriarchal society and values. In particular it emphasizes the ways in which violence against women need not be physical in a literal sense, but can nevertheless be all-pervading. It is what we could call the soft face of oppression that is satirically presented, for example, when the narrator notes: '[John] is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction' (12). Or when she says: 'It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so' (23).

All literary texts can be thought about in terms of how they represent gender difference and how they highlight gender-role stereotypes. Take, for example, an early sixteenth-century sonnet, such as Thomas Wyatt's 'Whoso List to Hunt':

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, alas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I, by no means, my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore,

Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
 Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.
 Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
 As well as I, may spend his time in vain.
 And graven with diamonds in letters plain
 There is written, her fair neck round about,
 'Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
 And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.'

Wyatt's sonnet figures men and women in a number of gender-stereotypical ways. Man is the hunter, woman is the hunted. Man is the subject, active, full of 'travail', whereas woman is the object, indeed she is not even figured as human but instead as simply 'an hind', a female deer. Moreover Wyatt's poem integrates this gender-stereotyping within its very structure of address. The poem, that is to say, is addressed to men (to those who wish, or 'list', to hunt), not to women. In this way it appears to offer a classic example of the construction or assumption of the reader as male. Gilman's short story and Wyatt's sonnet are radically different kinds of text, written at completely different periods and from within almost unimaginably heterogeneous cultures (England in the early sixteenth century, the United States in the late nineteenth century). Yet they do offer significant parallels. Both invite us to reflect critically on the question of gender and more particularly on the power of gender-stereotypes. In both texts, we encounter such stereotypes (I am a woman and therefore subordinate, passive, hysterical, an object, etc.), but we are also provoked to a questioning of the very idea of gender opposition as such.

On one level, then, there is a valuable and perhaps unavoidable reading of literary texts in terms of essentialism: there is essentially one form of sexual difference and that is the difference between male and female, boys and girls, men and women. The notion of essentialism here consists primarily in anatomical or biological difference: the man has a penis, whereas the woman does not, or the woman has a pudendum, breasts and a child-bearing capacity whereas the man has none of these. Various kinds of gender-stereotypes are then articulated, as it were, onto this essentialism: the male is strong, active, rational, the female is weak, passive, irrational and so forth. Within the logic of this description — which has dominated the history of Western culture — having a penis seems to have been so important that it becomes appropriate to speak of its *symbolic* significance, in other words to speak of the *phallus*. Texts or particular aspects of texts can then be described not only in terms of the patriarchal but also in terms of the phallogocentric or phallogocentric.

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Patriarchy involves upholding the supposed priority of the male. In Gilman's text, for example, John is the head (or patriarch) of the family, he makes the decisions and rules the household. The notion of phallogocentrism, on the other hand, involves some of the more subtle, more symbolic and perhaps more fundamental ways in which the phallus can be equated with power, authority, presence, and the right to possession. The 'logo' of 'phallogocentrism' points us towards the argument (promoted by theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray) that the very notions of truth, reason, rationality, the proper, meaning, etc. are phallogocentric. Jonathan Culler has summarized this as follows:

Numerous aspects of criticism, including the preference for metaphor over metonymy, the conception of the author, and the concern to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate meanings, can be seen as part of the promotion of the paternal. Phallogocentrism unites an interest in patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of origin. (Culler 1983, 61)

It is in this context, then, that the French theorist Irigaray speculates on the possibilities of kinds of language that would somehow break with the masculine. She remarks:

For, a feminine language would undo the unique meaning, the proper meaning of words, of nouns: which still regulates all discourse. In order for there to be a proper meaning, there must indeed be a unity somewhere. But if feminine language cannot be brought back to any unity, it cannot be simply described or defined. (Irigaray 1977, 65)

As may already be clear from these very brief accounts of phallogocentrism and phallogocentrism, reading literary texts in terms of sexual difference can be more complex and demanding than simply recognizing the gender oppositions and hierarchies by which a text is structured. As feminist criticism has established, such kinds of recognition are crucial. Inevitably perhaps, we start from an essentialist position and our reading of literary texts is guided by this. But what is most important about literary representations of gender is not merely that a particular text can be shown to be sexist or phallogocentric, or even feminist. Rather it is that literary texts call into question many of our essentialist ideas about gender. Literature, in this way, can be defined as the space in which our essentialist assumptions about sexual difference are most intensively and most productively challenged.

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In other words it could be argued that there is no such thing as a feminist, or a masculinist or a sexist, literary work *in itself*: it all depends on how it is read. An obvious example of this would be the work of D.H. Lawrence. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969) was a groundbreaking book because of the acuity and passion with which it attacked Lawrence's (and other male writers') work for its 'phallic consciousness' (238) and degradation of women. Millet's account still makes powerful reading, but it is also in important respects reductive – especially in its author-centred representations of the novels it discusses. For Millet, that is to say, the aim of literary criticism is criticizing the male author – a figure whose male voice, male presence and male ideas are unequivocally clear, for Millet, in everything Lawrence wrote. More recently, however, critics have tended to focus more on the tensions and paradoxes within Lawrence's writings in themselves, rather than on the author-figure thought to be looming behind them. Theorists such as Leo Bersani (1978) and Jonathan Dollimore (1991) have thus emphasized the idea of Lawrence's texts as in many ways working *against themselves* and as unsettling various assumptions that we may have (or Lawrence may have had) about gender as such. Thus Dollimore, for example, focuses on the fact that 'so much [in Lawrence's work] is fantasized from the position of the woman . . . and in a voice that is at once *blindingly heterosexual and desperately homoerotic*' (Dollimore 1991, 275).

We can consider these points by looking again at the Gilman and Wyatt texts. As we have suggested, *The Yellow Wallpaper* reads, on one level at least, as a literary case-study in the oppression and repression of a middle-class white woman in the United States in the late nineteenth century. It may be read as a dynamic feminist demand for liberation from the maddening claustrophobia of patriarchy. But the text is at the same time powerfully equivocal. For instance, simply in terms of the narrative and its conclusion, we must ask ourselves: how much of an affirmation is it, if the only possible liberation for a woman is madness? Is it possible to speak on behalf of women from the position of madness? If, as the narrative of Gilman's text implies, the only way out of patriarchy is to fall, or creep, into madness, is there in fact any way out at all? Isn't *The Yellow Wallpaper* as much caught up in the net of the patriarchal as, say, Henry Miller's *Sexus*? Such questions are not meant as a way of *closing down* the Gilman text by reducing it to the transmission of a merely negative message about the position of women in relation to patriarchy. Rather they are questions which the text itself can be said to pose: to read *The Yellow Wallpaper* critically is to engage

unstable narrator
 diminishes its success as protest

with its equivocality, with its ironic and complex refigurations of essentialist notions of gender.

In this context it is not surprising that some of the most provocative feminist criticism since the mid-1970s has been closely bound up with what is referred to as deconstruction. Deconstruction could be defined as a strategy of disruption and transformation with regard to every and any kind of essentialism. 'Essentialism' here would include, for example, the assumption that everyone is essentially either male or female, that the literal is essentially different from the figurative, that speech is essentially different from writing and so on. In particular, deconstruction involves the reversal and reworking or rewriting of those conceptual oppositions through which such essentialism operates. With feminism this has meant reversing the hierarchy of male and female, masculine and feminine, father and mother, phallic and (for example) clitoral, along with related couplings such as strong and weak, active and passive, rational and irrational, practical and impractical, presence and absence. Deconstruction, however, entails not only the reversal or overturning of hierarchies but also the transformation of the basis on which they have operated. This might be thought about in relation to the passage from *The Yellow Wallpaper* with which we began this chapter. The narrator tells us: 'John is practical in the extreme. He has no patience with faith, an intense horror of superstition, and he scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures' (9). What we have here is an apparently straightforward assertion of the physician husband's practicality and rationalism, implicitly contrasted with the narrator's own lack of these. But on another level the passage might be said to disturb and even transform the very basis on which we presume to talk about the practical and impractical, the rational and irrational. After all, as George Eliot's great novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876) rhetorically asks: 'Who supposes that it is an impossible contradiction to be superstitious and rationalising at the same time?' (48). Indeed, as Gilman's text here intimates, rationalism can be construed as in turn a kind of superstition. To 'scoff openly', as John does, suggests exaggeration and defensiveness. To have 'an intense horror of superstition' is itself perhaps a mark of superstitionness. There is, in short, a disturbance of the grounds of reason (here and elsewhere) in Gilman's text, and this has to do with deconstruction in the sense that deconstruction is specifically concerned with a suspension of the logic of non-contradiction. It is interested in subversions of what is perhaps the founding claim of Western philosophy, namely Aristotle's proposal that it is not possible for A to be A and

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not A at the same time. Deconstructive feminism puts this founding claim into question. It is rather like the Freudian argument that the unconscious knows no contradictions: one can dream of a compound figure, for example, someone who is (say) both your mother and not your mother but someone else at the same time. Feminism in its deconstructive mode, then, undermines the very basis on which identity and non-identity are constructed. A deconstructive reading of *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for example, might elaborate on the logic whereby the narrator is both mad and not mad at the same time. The narrator both is and is not the woman behind the wallpaper. The narrator both is and is not herself.

Over the past thirty years, feminism has revolutionized literary and cultural studies. But, as recent critical work such as Judith Butler's suggests, the political force of feminism remains limited so long as it promotes itself as an 'identity politics'. The problem with the essentialism or (in Butler's term) the *foundationalism* of 'identity politics' is that 'it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very "subjects" that it hopes to represent and liberate' (Butler 1990, 148). This, in part, is why we have titled this chapter 'Sexual Difference' rather than, say, 'Gender and Identity'. What the term 'sexual difference' may usefully gesture towards, then, is the idea that identity itself is perhaps most productively and critically seen as fissured, haunted, at odds with itself. 'Sexual difference' involves not only difference *between* but difference *within*. We are, in Julia Kristeva's phrase, 'strangers to ourselves' (Kristeva, 1991). *The Yellow Wallpaper* could be seen to enact or allegorize this notion of difference *within*. That is to say, it subverts the idea of identity itself, in its presentation of a woman who is, in a sense, uncannily double, always already inhabited by another, in this case the woman behind the wallpaper. The text thus prompts us to ask: what is a woman (and conversely, what is a man) if she is double within herself?

This sort of disruption or subversion of identity is further suggested at the level of *writing* itself. The narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* presents herself as a writer. This is indicated in the passage we cited at the beginning of this chapter: 'I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind.' The narrator attests to her own 'imaginative power and habit of story-making' (15). With this in mind we could suggest the following hypothesis: wherever there is writing, sexual or gender identity becomes equivocal, questionable, open to transformation. The hypothesis might be considered in relation to Thomas Wyatt's 'Whoso list to hunt'. We have suggested earlier how clearly this poem seems to categorize and distinguish between men and

women, even to the extent of postulating its very addressee as a male. A conventional response to this poem is, in the first instance at least, firmly guided by essentialist and oppositional thinking: man vs. woman, hunter vs. hunted, etc. But there are other ways in which to think about this poem and to appreciate that, like other literary works, it can be seen to call into question many of our essentialist ideas and assumptions. For example, through its implicit elision of a female reader it provokes the questions: How should a woman read this poem? Is it possible that the apparent *absence* of women as addressees might be construed as a testament to the idea that a woman reader is precisely what the poem calls for but cannot have, and that this absence is strangely figured in the rhetoric of the poem itself, for instance in the image of trying to hold the wind in a net? Is the wind that is woman more or less powerful than the net? Is the net of patriarchy that we mentioned earlier only so much wind in turn?

Or to put these questions in a somewhat different form: To whom does writing belong? The idea that writing (and therefore literature in general) is a site of questioning and possible transformation of sexual or gender identity applies to both the Wyatt sonnet as a whole and to its final couplet in particular:

'Noli me tangere, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.'

Whose words are these? To whom are they addressed? Such writing, 'graven with diamonds in letters plain', renders paradoxical the distinctions between man and woman, man and man (the speaker and Caesar), the touchable and untouchable, wild and tame, addressor and addressee.

Literary texts at once encourage *and* exceed the parameters of essentialist or identity-oriented readings. By rendering the nature of sexual identity fundamentally questionable they provide a particularly disturbing as well as exhilarating space in which to reflect on the question that Foucault asks in the context of the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite: 'Do we truly need a true sex?' (Foucault 1980, 3)

FURTHER READING

For an accessible and clear account of contemporary feminist criticism and theory, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). For a more

gender is redundant?

*Identity
fluidity
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challenging and radical view, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990). *Speaking of Gender* (Showalter, ed. 1989) is a good, wide-ranging collection of essays on gender. Another good collection, oriented towards rethinking gender from within, is *Sexual Sameness* (Bristow 1992b). See, too, in this context, Jonathan Dollimore's extensive and provocative study, *Sexual Dissidence* (1991). Finally, for an important historical account of 'woman', see Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?'* (1988).

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God

John Lennon, playing his celestially white piano, begins the song entitled 'God' (1970) by singing: 'God is a concept / by which we measure / our pain'. What kind of concept is God? In this chapter we propose to explore this question and its relation to literature. In doing this we shall try to emphasize not only that literature is pervasively concerned with religious themes but also that the ways in which we think, read and write about literature are likewise pervaded by religious – and particularly Judaeo-Christian – ideas. The concept of God, in other words, has as much to do with the practice of literary criticism as with the nature of literature. To give three very brief instances. The most famous atheist in the history of English poetry, Percy Bysshe Shelley, asserts that 'A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth' (Shelley 1977, 485): in the phrase 'eternal truth', Shelley is being religious. In his Preface to *Poems* (1853), Matthew Arnold writes of the name 'Shakespeare' that it is 'a name the greatest perhaps of all poetical names; a name never to be mentioned without reverence' (Arnold 1965, 599): with the word 'reverence', Arnold is being religious. Finally, in his essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), T.S. Eliot declares that 'The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality' (Eliot 1975, 40): by appealing to 'self-sacrifice', Eliot is being religious.

We would like to try to approach the question of 'God' and literary studies by presenting, with all due respect, a series of six edicts. As we hope will become clear, these edicts are not cut in stone. Nor do they add up to a list of systematic principles or rules. Our aim, as elsewhere in this