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The Yellow Metonym: "You and Jane" in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Daniel Bristow

"What is the matter?" he cried. "For God's sake, what are you doing!"
I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.
"I've got out at last," said I, "in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"
Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path, so that I had to creep over him every time! (Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* 32)

The last endnote in the Virago Modern Classics edition of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) – presumably written by Elaine R. Hedges – reads:

> At this point, at the end of her story, Gilman has the narrator say to her husband, 'I've got out at last, … in spite of you and Jane.' There has been no previous reference to a 'Jane' in the story, and so one must speculate as to the reference. It could conceivably be a printer's error, since there are both a Julia and a Jennie in the story (Jennie is the housekeeper [and the narrator's sister-in-law] and functions as a guardian/imprisoner for the heroine, and Julia is an infernal female relative). On the other hand, it could be that Gilman is referring here to the narrator herself, to the narrator's sense that she has gotten free of both her husband and her 'Jane' self: free, that is, of herself as defined by marriage and society ([Hedges] 62–63).[1]

In neither the Penguin nor the Oxford World's Classics editions is there a note associated with the anomalous name.[2] The narrator's gaoling husband is John, lending credence to the "Jane' self' scenario of the Virago note, positioning the narrator as the marriage-and-society-defined other half of the John-and-Jane couplet.[3] However, it will be suggested here that a third interpretation might weave itself into the fabric of the text in such a way as to draw out certain metatextual – almost synaesthesic – resonances.

The prevalence of names in the story beginning with the letter "J" (which in many respects linguistically mirrors "Y") is no coincidence. In French, the word for "yellow" is of course "*jaune*", which all of the main characters' names get closer to – Julia, Jennie, John – until the near-homonym of the once-mentioned Jane, which drops the "u" from the French word – a letter synecdochal of the self/other designation "you"; and its transliteration, into Dutch, for example – and which can be reconnected in an equation which it appears Gilman was almost making explicit in the phrase, "in spite of you and Jane":

> You *and* Jane
>
> u + Jane = *Jaune*.[4]

This line of reasoning is not advanced so as to impute an indisputable intentionality to the author of the story, but is rather a hermeneutical intervention out of which it is hoped further openings and avenues within the hallucinatorily jaundiced *mise en scène* of the story can emerge. (However, if any justification for this speculative reading, in terms of genetic criticism, were needed – beyond the sheer likelihood of knowledge of the word for the color in French – relevant evidence can be sought biographically.[5])

If the signifier "Jane" thus also partakes of the yellow that suffuses the story and sucks in its narrator, we can read its occurrence perhaps in terms of metonymy, extending Roman Jakobson's definition of linguistic "contiguity" somewhat, to encompass a notion of *contagion*.[6] In the story, the

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Notes

1. Hedges composed the “Afterword” to the text for this version’s original 1973 publication with the Feminist Press.

2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman. The Yellow Wall-Paper, Herland, and Selected Writings. London: Penguin Classics, 2019; Charlotte Perkins Gilman The Yellow Wall-Paper and Other Stories. ed. Robert Shulman. Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998.

3. In R. D. Laing’s penetrating psychological works he uses the Jack-and-Jill couple to explore the dictates of this culturally discursive dyad. His structural elucidations of the constructions of constraining lifeworlds that create the binds of the notions of self and others’ “illnesses” are highly relevant to this study of Gilman’s work. See, in particular, Laing.

4. To the best of my knowledge this theory has not been previously expounded, although it seems striking that the connection has not been commented on elsewhere; should it turn out to have been so, duplication is thus accidental. For a very acute close reading of names and the use of particular pronouns in The Yellow Wallpaper, see Golden. See also, of relevance, Knight, and Bak.

5. Around the time (the late 1880s) of the composition of The Yellow Wallpaper, Cynthia J. Davis recounts: “[Gilman] filled her days with reading, writing, teaching art, and learning French, not to mention housework” (Davis 114). Gilman herself talks of this very work – to which she returned after having been advised by a doctor in 1887 “never to touch pen, brush or pencil again, as long as [she] lived” – in relation to The Yellow Wallpaper in a 1913 article for Forerunner, as: “work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite” (Gilman, “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’?” 331).

6. See, for example, Jakobson (95–96), in which he states: “it is generally realized that romanticism is closely linked with metaphor, whereas the equally intimate ties of realism with metonymy usually remain unnoticed[.] [Realist] prose […] is forwarded essentially by contiguity.”

7. For the theory of psychosis as perceptual metaphor – in which the linguistic function of metaphor, active in neuroses, is so totally disavowed (foreclosed) that it reappears, and is experienced, in the perception of the psychotic – see Bristow (59–60).

8. The “nervous depression” and “hysterical anxiety” are what her physician husband of “high standing”, John, diagnoses in the narrator, and are the reason he takes her to

the house in which she is consigned to the room with the yellow wallpaper (Gilman, The Yellow Wallpaper 2). An example of a less optimistic reading can be found in Barbara A. Seuss – who unequivocally conflates the narrator and Jane – who contends: “Jane is really no freer at the end of the story than at the beginning. In fact, we can assume that her intensified mental illness will only lead her to suffer even more at the hands of the same patriarchal establishment whose (mis)diagnosis defined her mental illness in the first place[.] Her role in bringing to light the fact that social oppression helped to both create and sustain what could have been a less tragic illness is an accomplishment that, after all, only the reader, and not Jane, can appreciate.” (Seuss 95). Indeed, as Gilman herself put it, in relation to the story: “it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (Gilman, “Why I Wrote ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’?” 332).

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