INTRODUCTION TO THE 1998 EDITION

Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson

EXACTLY a century ago, in 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's first nonfiction book, *Women and Economics*, was published to universal acclaim. The book's publication catapulted its 38-year-old author into intellectual celebrity. Almost overnight she became "the leading intellectual in the women's movement."¹ Her ideas were widely circulated and discussed; she was in great demand on the lecture circuit, and her intellectual circle included some of the most prominent thinkers of the age.

Yet by the mid-1960s, she was nearly forgotten, and *Women and Economics* long out of print. Thirty years ago, the eminent historian Carl Degler reintroduced Gilman's most distinguished work to a new generation of readers. Degler attributed Gilman's fall from popular view in part to the postsuffrage doldrums in which the American women's movement had found itself since the mid-1920s. But he, then perched in Poughkeepsie at Vassar College, sensed the emergent tenor of the times in the years immediately following the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963—a renewed restlessness among American women about the yawning gap between the lives they wanted to live and the

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lives to which they had been consigned. Degler grasped the need of these increasingly politicized feminist intellectuals for foremothers, mentors who had been there before, wrestled with the same issues. By editing *Women and Economics*, Degler returned Charlotte Perkins Gilman to history.

Of course, he did not do it alone. After *Women and Economics* was reissued, Gilman's most famous works of fiction were also rediscovered and republished. Perhaps her most famous short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," which chronicled the descent into madness of a woman when she was prevented from experiencing a vital public life, was anthologized in 1973 by Elaine Hedges; in 1980 by Gilman's biographer, Ann Lane; in 1989 by Lynne Sharon Schwartz; and in 1992 by Barbara Solomon. The most renowned of Gilman's utopian novels, *Herland*, which had only been serialized in her monthly magazine, the *Forerunner*, in 1915, was republished in 1979, and has remained a feminist classic, a touchstone work in which readers are invited to imagine the way society could develop if only there were no men in it.

Despite this recent interest, however, *Women and Economics*, Gilman's signal book, has once again gone out of print. We are reviving it now for its fresh and continuing insight to a generation of feminists and social thinkers poised—as they were when the book was written—on the cusp of a new century.

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Degler's edition of *Women and Economics* spoke to what a second wave of feminist women wanted—indeed, needed—to read in the 1960s through the early 1990s. Second Wave feminism took its impetus, in part, from Friedan's indictment of the cult of domesticity. In her eyes, women had become virtual prisoners of their own homes, unable to work, unable really to have much of a public life at all. These sentiments echoed Gilman's insistence that women's economic independence was the single most important element in their emancipation.

By the 1980s, though, women had come to achieve that public presence and even a modicum of that economic independence Gilman advocated. The walls that had so long kept women out of the public sphere had begun to crumble—as decisively, if not as rapidly or completely, as the deliberate dismantling of the Berlin Wall. Women had entered the professions, the work world, the military (and its academies); women were in the House and the Senate, the statehouse and the courthouse.

Many American women began to realize that the exodus from their homes to the workplace accomplished only half a revolution, both socially and personally. Many yearned also for the pleasures of motherhood, for family and domestic life. Suddenly, “having it all” became the motto of a new wave of American women. Could women have it all? Could they have the involving, exciting, important careers

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to which they now believed they had become entitled, while at the same time having the warm, loving support of family life? Or would they, like Gilman and the women of her generation, have to sacrifice one for the other?

Of course, Gilman understood that men face no such painful choice. To a large extent, men already do "have it all"—the careers and the nurturing families to come home to—and the reason those who do have it all *do* is precisely the reason that women do not. Listen to how contemporary, how prescient, are Gilman's words from an essay in 1906:²

We have so arranged life that a man may have a home and family, love, companionship, domesticity, and fatherhood, yet remain an active citizen of age and country. We have so arranged life, on the other hand, that a woman must "choose"; must either live alone, unloved, unaccompanied, uncared for, homeless, childless, with her work in the world for sole consolation; or give up all world-service for the joys of love, motherhood, and domestic service.

Gilman had figured out what contemporary women have also begun to understand—half a revolution was no revolution at all; if women were simply going to trade their kitchen aprons for power suits, they would remain unfulfilled in partial, gender-

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limited lives. In that sense, as well, Gilman understood that men were going to have to be a necessary element in the liberation of women.

Her analysis stressed the connection between work and home, between the public and private sectors. She understood that women's maternal nurturing had been overdeveloped, at the cost of the underdevelopment of their abilities for rational and critical thinking and civic participation. By contrast, she argued, men's capacities for success in the public sphere had been overdeveloped, and at the expense of their abilities to care and nurture.

Gilman also understood that for the social transformation promised by feminism to succeed, both women *and* men would have to change, that shifts in one sphere would redound to the other. And she believed throughout her life and writing that women's entry into the public arena and the reforms of the family she proposed would be a win-win situation—for both women and men. The public sphere would no longer be deprived of women's particular abilities, and men would also be able to enlarge the possibilities to experience and express the emotional sustenance of family life.

Gilman joined many of her reform-minded contemporaries in making what are today called "social constructionist" arguments, suggesting that the personality forms we observe have their roots not in some intrinsic, biological predisposition, but are

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fashioned from the circumstances of people's lives, from the materials and ideas we find around us. She argued that it was not women's "nature" to be passive, weak, helpless, and dependent, any more than it was man's "nature" to be domineering, aggressive, arrogant, and oppressive. "It is not that women are really smaller-minded, weaker-minded, more timid and vacillating," she wrote in *The Home* (1903), "but that whosoever, man or woman, lives always in a small dark place, is always guarded, protected, directed and restrained, will become inevitably narrowed and weakened by it. The woman is narrowed by the home and the man is narrowed by the woman."³

Fourteen years later, the writer and bohemian radical Floyd Dell echoed these sentiments in an essay entitled "Feminism for Men." From a man's point of view, the strict separation of spheres was both unnecessary and severely limited. It made the home, as he put it, "a little dull." He wrote:

When you have got a woman in a box, and you pay rent on the box, her relationship to you insensibly changes character. It loses the fine excitement of democracy. It ceases to be companionship, for companionship is only possible in a democracy. It is no longer a sharing of life together—it is a breaking of life apart. Half a life—cooking, clothes, and children; half a life—

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business, politics, and baseball. It doesn't make much difference which is the poorer half. Any half, when it comes to life, is very near to none at all.

Feminism, Dell concluded, was "going to make it possible for the first time for men to be free."⁴

But in other ways, Gilman completely departed from her contemporaries. For one thing, she disavowed the term "feminism," preferring in its place a vaguer, yet more inclusive term, "humanism." Further, the domestic reforms she advocated—cooperative kitchens, the professionalization of housework and child care—carried her beyond the agendas even of most women reformers of her day. Where she was graphic and concrete about the reforms of the home, many other thinkers remained nostalgic or romantic.

On the other hand, where these other writers were graphic and concrete, Gilman was often elliptical, evasive, and downright negative. Especially about sex. Dell and other bohemian radicals at the turn of the century preached "free love," and sexual liberation born of a peculiar reading of Freudian psychology. Gilman repudiated Freud, and came pretty close—repeatedly, in various works and several genres—to denouncing sexual pleasure altogether.

Still, Gilman predicted that changes were in the offing at the turn of the twentieth century, and em-

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braced the many advances she saw as imminent in the future. Who would have predicted it would take the entire century to begin to free women from the home, and that the transformation of men's lives would be only a glimmer of possibility by the century's end?

So now, poised as we are at the edge of a new millennium, fired once again by the possibilities of transformation that would allow women and men to live full, rich, nourishing lives—both as productive workers and as caring and loving partners and parents—we can again rediscover *Women and Economics*, and find that both Gilman's analysis of the relations between women and men, and her hopes for their transformation, may yet, again, speak to us.

With the republication of her autobiography in 1975, a major biography published in 1990, and the republication of many of her books, the story of Gilman's life is fairly well known. She was born Charlotte Anna Perkins on July 3, 1860, in Hartford, Connecticut, to one of the nineteenth century's most prominent families. Her father, Frederick Beecher Perkins, was the grandson of Lyman Beecher and nephew of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Frederick's sister, Emily (who became Charlotte's favorite aunt), was married to Edward Everett Hale. Charlotte's mother, Mary Ann Fitch Westcott, was a descendant of Roger Williams.

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Despite their prominence, however, Charlotte's father was a ne'er-do-well and a dilettante. He attended Yale but never graduated, studied law but never practiced, and abandoned the family soon after Charlotte's birth, returning only for occasional visits before the couple formally divorced in 1873. (Charlotte had one older brother, Thomas. Two other siblings died in their first year.) That fall, Charlotte moved into a female-dominated household in Providence, consisting of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, and she began to attend young ladies' school.

Never particularly feminine—she was physically strong and vigorous, and was passionate about sports—Charlotte first thought to be an artist, and entered the newly opened Rhode Island School of Design in 1878. Family problems intervened, and she left school without graduating; her early training, however, provided her with the basis to earn a living as a commercial artist.

Early in 1882, she met Charles Walter Stetson, a promising young artist in Providence. Their courtship was difficult and turbulent. Charlotte had resolved to remain single and devote herself to her career. As she wrote in her autobiography:⁵

On the one hand I knew it was normal and right in general, and held that a woman should be able to have marriage and motherhood, and

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do her work in the world also. On the other, I felt strongly that for me it was not right, that the nature of the life before me forbade it, that I ought to forgo the more intimate personal happiness for complete devotion to my work.

Nevertheless, soon she capitulated to Walter's earnest courtship. "I knew of course that the time would come when I must choose between two lives," she wrote in her autobiography, "but never did I dream that it would come so soon, and that the struggle would be so terrible."⁶ Charlotte talked herself out of her misgivings, and willed herself to accept Walter's proposal. They were married in May 1884.

The marriage was ill fated from the start. Despite Walter's efforts—he was attentive and dutiful, and even, she says, helped with the housework—Charlotte felt torn between marital obligations and the lure of her career. The tension only redoubled when her daughter, Katherine, was born in March 1885. At first, Charlotte was overjoyed by motherhood, but she gradually sank into what she described as a "growing melancholia," a "constant dragging weariness miles below zero."⁷

Her emotional distress became increasingly acute. "Here was a charming home," she wrote, "loving and devoted husband; an exquisite baby, healthy intelligent and good; a highly competent mother to

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run things; a wholly satisfactory servant—and I lay all day on the lounge and cried.”⁸ Even her essays from these years describe marriage as a life-or-death struggle for women, tearing them between two irreconcilable passions—motherhood and career.⁹

By 1887, Charlotte’s depression had become so serious and debilitating that she sought the advice of Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the Philadelphia physician who had gained national fame for his treatment of a somewhat trendy, elite condition called “neurasthenia.” Mitchell saw neurasthenia—a nervous disorder marked by both anxiety and depression—as a consequence of the overcivilized modern life, “that of the business man exhausted from too much work, and the society woman exhausted from too much play,” as Charlotte described it.¹⁰ In both cases, neurasthenia was marked by gender nonconformity. For men, that meant passivity and lassitude, derived from the sedentary effects of the modern workplace; for women, by contrast, neurasthenia was marked by depression over the balance between work and family, and the inability to function as properly feminine.

Mitchell’s remedies returned to traditional gender norms and a strict separation of spheres. “I no more want women to be preachers, lawyers, or platform orators than I want men to be seamstresses, or nurses of children,” Mitchell had told the graduating class at Radcliffe College in 1890. Men were

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urged to experience the tonic freshness of the outdoors by spending, perhaps, a few weeks at "dude ranches," which had been newly developed for precisely that purpose. And women were counseled to seek plenty of exposure to their babies and bed rest.

As Charlotte recalled, Mitchell told her: "Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you all the time. Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch a pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live." She tried. She "went home, followed those directions rigidly for months, and came perilously close to losing my mind."¹¹

Instead, she got out of bed, took her daughter, and left her husband, traveling first to Pasadena and then to Oakland, California, to live with her best friend, Grace Channing. Her diary entry read: "Thirty years old. Made a wrong marriage—lots of people do. Am heavily damaged but not dead."

In California, Charlotte threw herself into work, becoming a follower of Edward Bellamy's Nationalist Movement. The publication of her first major poem, the satiric "Similar Cases" in the *Nationalist*, the movement's magazine, made her an instant celebrity. (William Dean Howells, also a Nationalist, said it was the best satire since James Russell Lowell's 1848 verse collection, *The Biglow Papers*.) Her literary career had begun.

And what a prodigious career it was! Between

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1888, when she left Walter Stetson, to her death in 1935, Gilman published eight novels, 171 short stories, 473 poems, and 1,472 nonfiction pieces—nine of them books.¹² In her *Forerunner* magazine alone, she wrote critical articles, editorials, essays, poetry, reviews, short fiction, and two serialized books a year; the full seven-year run of the magazine equaled some twenty-eight full-length books.¹³ Yet prolific as she was, Gilman's writing turned on a few dominant themes: the transformations of marriage, the family, and the home. And even these returned insistently to her central argument, "the economic independence and specialization of women as essential to the improvement of marriage, motherhood, domestic industry, and racial improvement."¹⁴ The liberation of women—and of children and of men, for that matter—required getting women out of the house, both practically and ideologically. It was work that was "the normal life of every human being; work, which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite."

Charlotte certainly followed her own advice. She became a celebrated author and widely popular lecturer, traveling across the country and, soon enough, abroad as well, advocating woman suffrage and social reform. "The Yellow Wallpaper," her barely fictionalized account of her own struggles with neurasthenia and its "cures," was published in *New England Magazine* in January 1892; the next year,

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she published her first book, *In This Our World*, a book of poems that was well received by critics.¹⁵

In 1898, Charlotte published *Women and Economics*, her breakthrough work of nonfiction, and probably her single greatest book. Subtitled *A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*, the book was an immediate success, widely read and discussed both in the United States and abroad. The book, which the *Nation* called "the most significant utterance on the subject of women since Mill's *The Subjection of Women*," established Charlotte as the leading intellectual in the American women's movement.

In this work, Gilman drew from several different sources to produce a groundbreaking and original synthesis. From Marx and others, she took the idea that the central arena of human life is the realm of production, and that the workplace is the site of both oppression and liberation. What's more, she also agreed that the differences among people are to be found not in nature, in biological differences, but rather in the ways they are raised.¹⁶ But unlike Marx, who had limited his discussion to economic classes, Gilman applied the idea to gender. Women and men are far more alike than they are different, she argued, but they are socialized to be dramatically different, and at a cost to both. From Darwin she took the idea of progress and evolution. We have changed, she observed, and thus we can change and we must

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change. A theory of evolution underlies all Gilman's work, from her critique of the home as an anachronistic throwback to her vision of a future of economic independence and professional housework and child care. From Thorstein Veblen she took the blistering critique of woman as ornament, as a medium of exchange between men. And from the sociologist Lester Ward she took the idea that women, not men, were the originators of evolution, the origin of the species. Ward was, Gilman wrote, "quite the greatest man I have ever known," and his "gyneco-centric" theory she thought "the greatest single contribution to the world's thought since Evolution."¹⁷

Gilman may have drawn upon the ideas of these thinkers, but she did not become part of the movements inspired by them. Though she relied upon Darwin's theory of evolution, she did not become a social Darwinist. Though she drew upon Marx and socialism, she did not become a socialist.¹⁸ In fact, while Gilman wrote and edited for numerous organizational publications—she edited the suffrage column for the *People*, the Providence Knights of Labor weekly, and was a contributing editor for the *American Fabian* and *Woman's Journal*, for example—she was often marginal to the prevailing orthodoxies of her age. As she wrote:¹⁹

Among the various unnecessary burdens of my life is that I have been discredited by conserva-

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tive persons as a Socialist, while to the orthodox Socialists themselves I was quite outside the ranks. Similarly the anti-suffrage masses had me blackly marked "Suffragist," while the suffragists thought me a doubtful if not dangerous ally on account of my theory of the need of economic independence to women.

Explicitly rejecting the term "feminist," she was especially uncomfortable with the sexual liberationist ethic that was emerging as an important strand of feminist thought. This discomfort also led her to be fully dismissive of Freud.

Women and Economics ushered in a period of prolific writing that scarcely diminished until her death. Gilman began writing articles regularly for some of the most popular magazines of her day, including the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Century*, *Scribner's*, *Appleton's*, the *Independent*, and the *Woman's Home Companion*. Six major works of nonfiction secured her reputation as one of the most important public intellectuals of her time. These included *Concerning Children* (1900), *The Home* (1903), *Human Work* (1904), *Women and Social Service* (1907), *The Man-Made World* (1911), and *His Religion and Hers* (1923). In all venues, Gilman's writing largely revolved around the central issues that, as she wrote in 1916, dominated her life: "the economic independence of women, the expert care of children in ad-

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dition to that of their mothers and the professionalizing of 'domestic industry.'"²⁰

Charlotte's personal life was stable if unorthodox. She lived in Oakland with her daughter, Kate, her mother, and Adeline Knapp, a reporter for the *San Francisco Call*, in a relationship that most biographers agree was lesbian. Grace, her closest friend, lived nearby, with Walter, whom she married in 1894, when his divorce from Charlotte became final. (They remained friends all their lives, and Kate lived periodically with Grace and her father.)

In 1900, Charlotte remarried, this time to her first cousin, George Houghton Gilman, who was seven years her junior. Houghton (called "Ho") was also the great-grandson of Lyman Beecher and nephew of Daniel Coit Gilman, the first president of Johns Hopkins University. Charlotte moved to New York, where Ho maintained his law practice, and the couple lived there for more than two decades in a place she described as "that unnatural city where every one is an exile."²¹

Those two decades were productive and happy ones for Gilman. Her books continued to receive significant attention. Many of her proposals were radical—even for our age, let alone hers. She was among the first to see the need for innovations in child rearing and in housework to ease the burdens of working women. While middle-class reformers began professionalizing their own pursuits as well

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as envisioning the positive outcomes of specialized expertise in others, Gilman was perhaps the first (and certainly the most influential) reformer to propose the professionalization of housework and child care, freeing women to pursue their goals in the workplace, and assigning to trained professionals the tasks that she argued were so haphazardly and unevenly done by mothers and wives. Housework was really work, and therefore ought to be "done by the hour by specially trained persons, with the service of cooked meals to the home," she wrote.²² She designed cooperative kitchens in urban apartment buildings, which, she argued, would facilitate women's balancing of work and family and also provide some social support and contact for wives who were homebound.

Other reforms today seem obvious and relatively tame, like nursery schools and child care facilities—great, airy nurseries where small children could be taught social skills and new ideas by women trained as professionals to do it.

In 1909, Gilman launched her 32-page monthly magazine, the *Forerunner*, in part because, as she wrote, no one else would publish all her work. Her aims, as she put them in the magazine's inaugural issue, were "to stimulate thought; to arouse hope, courage and impatience; to offer practical suggestions and solutions, to voice the strong assurance of better living, here, now, in our own hands to

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make.”²³ Available by subscription only, the *Forerunner* reached a circulation varying between five thousand and seven thousand, and sold for ten cents an issue or a dollar a year, about the same price as commercial monthlies at the time (although some ran up to a hundred pages, including advertising).²⁴ Like any magazine, the *Forerunner* contained virtually every genre of writing, from essays to poetry to sermons, satires to serialized novels. But unlike any other magazine of its magnitude before or since, every word of it, including the small amount of advertising copy that she would allow, was written by Gilman herself. And, like many magazines then and now, the *Forerunner* was not easy to keep afloat financially; despite Gilman’s celebrity, it earned only about half of its production costs through subscription fees, and Houghton regularly lent Charlotte money to keep it going.²⁵ Still, with all these pressures competing for her time and attention during the *Forerunner*’s seven years and two months in print, she practiced virtually every mode and genre of expression, and produced six complete books of nonfiction and five works of fiction for its pages.

These years, the years before World War I, witnessed Charlotte’s greatest public celebrity. In 1913, she addressed the International Suffrage Convention in Budapest, and also lectured in England, Germany, and Scandinavia. A series of lectures de-

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livered in New York and London in 1914 received extensive coverage in the *New York Times* and elsewhere. Her six-lecture series "The Larger Feminism" enthralled an audience that averaged over two hundred per lecture, and another series, "Our Male Civilization," also produced significant notice.

Following the United States' entry into the Great War, however, Charlotte broke ranks with many of her former allies in the peace movement (Charlotte had helped to organize and promote the Women's Peace Parade in 1914), largely out of antipathy to the Germans. Several of her closest friendships were ruptured by her support of the American entry into the war.

After the war, and especially after the gaining of suffrage by women in 1920, Gilman's popularity began to wane; her embrace by critics was chillier, and she had increasing difficulty finding publishers for her work, especially her fiction from the now-defunct *Forerunner*.

In 1923, she published *His Religion and Hers*, an idiosyncratic work that contrasts the male conception of life (as postponement and preparation for the afterlife) with the female (as paradise in the present time and place). Echoing earlier works, she distinguishes women's practicality from the mundane narrowing of horizons imposed by their current state.

In January 1932, Charlotte was diagnosed with

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breast cancer. Though she sought treatment, the death of her husband in May 1934 and the gradual spread of the cancer led her to decide to take her own life:²⁶

Human life consists in mutual service. No grief, pain, misfortune or "broken heart" is excuse for cutting off one's life while any power of service remains. But when all usefulness is over, when one is assured of unavoidable and imminent death, it is the simplest of human rights to choose a quick and easy death in place of a slow and horrible one.

On August 17, 1935, after saying goodbye to friends and family, Charlotte Perkins Gilman lay down in her bed and covered her face with a cloth soaked in chloroform. In the end, she wrote in a note, she "preferred chloroform to cancer."²⁷

Even in death she remained an outsider, a non-conformist who lived as an individual, accountable to herself and to her vision. (No one would have had to convince her of the morality of Dr. Kevorkian's ministrations.) Her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, published later that year, takes the reader up to the moment when she dies (her suicide note was appended), and has left a valuable source for understanding Gilman's temperament and career. "The one predominant duty is

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to find one's work and do it," she writes in the book's last lines, "and I have striven mightily at that. The religion, the philosophy, set up so early, have seen me through."²⁸

Women and Economics was the first—and the most significant—work that Gilman produced. It is the touchstone text for virtually all her ideas, "the sum of her life-work" according to Zona Gale in the foreword to Gilman's autobiography.²⁹ Her later works of nonfiction elaborate themes first raised in its pages. Here she touches on all the themes that dominated her work, including male-female relationships, child care, housework, domestic relationships, and male domination of the economy, politics, religion, and social life. Those topics that she did not discuss first in *Women and Economics* were left untreated in her nonfiction; it was only in her fiction that she took up the question of violence against women and the envisioning of a society without male domination.

Written over a six-week period of intensive and steady writing despite the fact that Gilman was traveling and lecturing at the time, *Women and Economics* was immediately seized by her feminist friends and colleagues as a breakthrough work when it was published in May 1898. Jane Addams called it a "masterpiece," and Florence Kelley wrote that it was "the first real, substantial contribution

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made by a woman to the science of economics."³⁰

And it received immediate critical acclaim. Writing in the *Woman's Journal* Henry Brown Blackwell called it "brilliant, suggestive, instructive, and inspiring." In the *Dial*, Arthur Woodford hailed Gilman's "profound social philosophy," which, coupling "a wealth of illustration" with "enough wit and sarcasm to make the book very entertaining reading," made her book "almost startling in the vividness of its truth." The *Nation* also praised its originality—the "new point of view, with a new largeness of outlook . . . a new imaginativeness in interpretation, and finally, a temper which, being good, is perhaps newest of all." And Annie Muzzey, writing in the *Arena*, welcomed Gilman's "declaration of freedom to reject the false and meretricious, and to exalt the real and abiding union of man and woman."³¹

Both the *Nation* and the *London Daily Chronicle* compared the book favorably to John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*. The former called it "the most significant utterance on the subject since Mill's," while the latter noted that since Mill "there has been no book dealing with the whole position of women to approach it in originality of conception and brilliancy of exposition."³²

Other reviewers were somewhat less effusive, but acknowledged the originality of Gilman's argument or the fluidity of her prose. The reviewer for the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books* noted

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Gilman's "adroit" argument about women's lack of training for the mundane tasks of motherhood; the housewife finds herself "an amateur cook, and amateur cleaner, an amateur needlewoman, and, as Mrs. Stetson uniquely puts it, an amateur mother." The *Literary World*, a Boston magazine, praised Gilman above other feminist writers of the time for not dwelling on suffrage, and also hailed her "pleasant wit," so that one might read her book "without the annoyance which so often nettles a reader who has heard much of the 'woman question.'" A reviewer for the *Chicago Tribune* insisted that the book "lacks beauty; it is too clever . . . it stirs no deep reverberations of the soul . . . but you can quote it, and remember its points."³³

Academic reviewers saw the work as "the cleverest, fairest and most forcible presentation" of the rights of women, despite the lack of academic scholarship. Even conservative reviewers offered the book a sort of grudging respect. "While the ideals of this author may not appeal to us," wrote the reviewer in the *Independent*, "we must admit that there is some force in her criticisms, and some reason in her suggestions."³⁴

It was no less welcome abroad, where it was translated into seven languages, including Dutch, Russian, Hungarian, and Japanese. Perhaps the most effusive review came from the *Westminster Gazette* in London:

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This book unites in a remarkable degree the charm of a brilliantly written essay with the inevitable logic of a proposition of Euclid. It deals, of course, with the woman question, but in a manner so striking, from a standpoint so novel, with a wit so trenchant yet void of offence, that no apology is needed for its publication in England after making something of a sensation in the United States. Nothing that we have read for many a long day can approach it in clearness of perception, in power of arrangement, and in lucidity of expression.

No wonder that in its time it was "considered by feminists of the whole world as the outstanding book on Feminism," according to the *New York City Review of Literature*.³⁵

Gilman's clever style and compelling arguments are evident in the book's opening pages. She challenges the Victorian assumptions that the observed differences between women and men are somehow reflective of biological differences. Yet it is also true, she notes, that women *are* inferior to men. Such inferiority is socially produced by the fact that we are the only animal species in which females are economically dependent upon males.

Stylistically, Gilman is playful; she anticipated possible objections to her arguments and answers them before they can ossify into critique. One might

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protest, she writes, that as wives, women earn a share of the "family wage" paid to the husband. But women only consume and do not produce, she answers. Critics will say that she is a "partner" in the marriage, which justifies this division of labor into male producer and woman consumer. But this misunderstands the nature of the marital partnership, which extends only in relation to children and to love. A male composer does not have his wife finish his compositions when he dies. A man's work is not destroyed when his wife dies.

If she is not a true partner, Gilman asks, how does a woman earn her living? Through domestic labor, through housework, some might say. True enough. The work of the wife at home allows the husband to produce more outside it. But so does the work of a horse. In fact, she argues, women are not really rewarded for their work in the home. Making the first of a series of class-based sarcastic observations she notes that the "women who do the most work get the least money, and the women who have the most money do the least work."³⁶

Perhaps, then, it is as mothers that women are rewarded. Not true again, says Gilman. If that were true, economic status would be connected to how many children one had; in fact those women with the fewest children seem to have the highest status, while those with the most children seem to have the lowest status.

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In the end, Gilman concedes, it must be for their domestic labor that women are rewarded. It is for the cleaning, the washing, the cooking, the mending, that women "earn" their keep. In fact, she argues, women "work longer and harder than most men, and not solely in maternal duties." What an ironic situation, Gilman claims. "In spite of her supposed segregation to maternal duties, the human female, the world over, works at extra-maternal duties for hours enough to provide her with an independent living, and then is denied independence on the ground that motherhood prevents her from working!"³⁷

Men make their living by work; women make their living by marriage. Their status is determined not by the work they do, but by the work of their husbands. (One cannot imagine a male doctor identifying himself as "a housewife's husband.")

The consequences are dire, but different, for women and men. Women's economic dependence exaggerates the differences between the sexes. Men overemphasize their masculine traits—rationality, competitiveness, aggressiveness, restlessness—at the expense of their human qualities. Women exaggerate their feminine traits—passivity, physical ability to attract men—over their human qualities. As a result, she says, women are "over-sexed"—by which she means they overdevelop their specifically feminine traits at the expense of their human traits.

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Gilman illustrates this difference with a hilarious and now justly famous distinction between a wild cow and a milk cow:

The wild cow is a female. She has healthy calves, and milk enough for them; and that is all the femininity she needs. Otherwise than that she is bovine rather than feminine. She is a light, strong, swift, sinewy creature, able to run, jump, and fight, if necessary. We, for economic uses, have artificially developed the cow's capacity for producing milk. She has become a walking milk-machine, bred and tended to that express end, her value measured in quarts. The secretion of milk is a maternal function—a sex-function. The cow is over-sexed.

If she were to be released, Gilman suggests, she would revert to her bovine temperament and use her energies for the general good of all cows, "not all running to milk."³⁸

The result of this overdevelopment of feminine qualities at the expense of human qualities is that men are more "human" than women. "Man is the human creature," she writes. "Woman has been checked, starved, aborted in human growth; and the swelling forces of race development have been driven back in each generation to work in her through sex functions alone."³⁹ Put the two together, and

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gender inequalities are exaggerated rather than muted.

Far ahead of her time, Gilman makes the argument that women's economic dependence and the overemphasis on physical attractiveness to ensure her economic survival are a form of low-level prostitution. "From the odalisque with the most bracelets to the debutante with the most bouquets," she continues, "woman's economic profit comes through the power of sex-attraction." Yet when we observe the extreme illustration of exactly this—in "the open market of vice," or prostitution—"we are sick with horror." On the other hand, when "we see the same economic relation made permanent, established by law, sanctioned and sanctified by religion, covered with flowers and incense and all accumulated sentiment, we think it innocent, lovely, and right." What hypocrisy! she sneers. Although in both cases "the female gets her food from the male by virtue of her sex-relationship to him," the "transient trade" we abhor; the "bargain for life" we celebrate."⁴⁰

Having lifted the gauzy veil of romantic obscurantism from what is essentially an economic relationship, Gilman extends her economic metaphors to all aspects of gender relations. "He is the market, the demand. She is the supply." Her attractiveness is a form of currency in this marketplace; it is what she has to sell. But unlike other marketers, she can-

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not appear to be too eager to sell, lest that cheapen the product and reduce demand; "she must not even look as if she wanted it!" She writes with bitter irony of the "cruel and absurd injustice of blaming the girl for not getting what she is allowed no effort to obtain" and with compassion for the unmarried woman, who "must sit passive as the seasons go by, and her 'chances' lessen with each year." She seems to wince at the "strain on a highly sensitive nervous organism to have so much hang on one thing, to see the possibility of attaining it grow less and less yearly, and to be forbidden to take any step toward securing it!"⁴¹

The arrangement does little good for women or for men. Marriage is corrupted into a mercenary relationship. By marrying, the woman becomes her husband's "house-servant, or at least the house-keeper." It distorts their courtship as well as their married life. "She gets her living by getting a husband. He gets his wife by getting a living."⁴²

What's more, such a system also impoverishes motherhood, which, in turn, does children little good. "The mother as a social servant instead of a home servant will not lack in true mother duty. She will love her child as well, perhaps better, when she is not in hourly contact with it, when she goes from its life to her own life, and back from her own life to its life, with ever new delight and power."⁴³ And

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"the child also," Gilman continues, "will feel this beneficent effect."⁴⁴ In the end, she argues,⁴⁵

The economically independent mother, widened and freed, strengthened and developed, by her social service, will do better service as a mother than it has been possible for her before. No one thing could do more to advance the interests of humanity than the wiser care and wider love of organized human motherhood around babies. This nobler mother, bearing nobler children, and rearing them in nobler ways, would go far toward making possible the world which we want to see.

The cause is simple; so too its solution. "The economic independence of woman will change all these conditions as naturally and inevitably as her dependence has introduced them."⁴⁶

Every facet of women's lives can change. Marriage, for example. Gilman suggests that "a pure and lasting monogamous sex-union can exist without bribe or purchase, without the manacles of economic dependence, and that men and women so united in sex-relation will still be free to combine with others in economic relation."⁴⁷

And motherhood—parenthood—can be reformed. A mother who is economically independent can be

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"a world servant instead of a house-servant; a mother knowing the world and living in it—can be to her children far more than has ever been possible before. Motherhood in the world will make that world a different place for her child."⁴⁸

But how do we get from here to there, from women's economic dependency to such a pure and healthy marriage and family life? Perhaps Gilman's most important contribution is her ability to offer sweeping but specific reforms that would actualize her vision. In a nutshell, Gilman's solution was the professionalization of domestic work, and the freeing of women from being forced to do it because of their dependency. In this, she joined many socialist reformers of the era in seeking to resolve the economic contradiction between the social circumstances of production (goods and services are created in concert with others) and private, individual ownership. Production is social; ownership is private. Socialists believed that socializing the means of production would automatically resolve the tensions between classes.

But Gilman extended that argument to the relations between women and men, relations that were no less "political" than those between classes, because women's economic dependency upon men reproduced the relationship between workers and owners. In domestic life, she argued, production remained

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social, public, but consumption and caregiving were private, individual. We make things together, but consume them separately. The professionalization of housework and child care and the liberation of women to create new identities in the world of work could together create a new era for women and children, and a far more profound relationship between women and men.

Professionalization meant several things. First, it meant that child-care arrangements would have to change. "If it can be shown that our babies would be better off if part of their time was passed in other care than their mothers', then such other care would be right; and it would be the duty of motherhood to provide it."⁴⁹ Day care, provided by well-trained and professional day-care workers, would be far superior, Gilman believed, to the haphazard, erratic, and unpredictable care given to children by their mothers, no matter how well intended.

Housework also should be left to the experts. Cooking, for example, disfigures male-female relationships. "Is it not time that the way to a man's heart through his stomach should be relinquished for some higher avenue?" Gilman asks. "The stomach should be left to its natural uses, not made a thoroughfare for stranger passions and purposes; and the heart should be approached through higher channels." The current system leaves us poorly

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nourished, both physically and spiritually—so Gilman proposes the professionalization of cooking, putting it in “the hands of trained experts.” That way, a woman could “stand beside man as the comrade of his soul, not the servant of his body.”⁵⁰

Apartment houses could be built without kitchens, since “a family unit which is only bound together with a table cloth is of questionable value,” and the building itself could construct a large, collective, buildingwide kitchen in the basement, where women could prepare the occasional meal cooperatively, thus satisfying their need for socializing as well as domestic work, nurturing themselves while they nurture their families.

The result of these changes, Gilman argues, would be neither the reduction of motherhood nor the estrangement of wifely affections. In fact, it would mean a larger motherhood, with women free to love and care for their children, which is, after all, what they do best, and leaving all the other work to others, who are trained to do it. And it would mean a larger domestic partnership for the married couple, with women freed to pursue the very interests and public lives that will make them more interesting, more desirable, and more affectionate to their spouses.

Gilman was sanguine about the possibilities of change, in part because it all seemed so simple. “The economic independence of woman will change

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all these conditions as naturally and inevitably as her dependence has introduced them." And so, she concludes, when "the mother of the race is free, we shall have a better world."⁵¹

It all seemed so simple, and indeed the changes were upon us. All that remained was to spell out exactly the dynamics of the transition in which we were already engaged. Virtually all Gilman's subsequent writing was an elaboration of the themes first raised in *Women and Economics*. Her first two subsequent books focused on motherhood from two angles she had already suggested—child care and housework. These were the common points of objection to women's rights and economic independence, the areas where women were thought to be so desperately needed at home. *Concerning Children* (1900) and *The Home* (1903) take up where *Women and Economics* left off, specifying the ways in which such notions were economically, emotionally, and morally suspect.

First, the children. We raise our children all wrong, Gilman flatly argues. Although there is nothing more important than the raising of children—"on its right treatment rests the progress of the world," she argues⁵²—we ask people who have no training, but who mean well, mothers, to do it, and when they can't we ask servants or nurses to pitch in, though neither of these has any partic-

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ular training in the proper care of children either.

But who can train the baby any better than the mother? Gilman asks herself rhetorically:

If the mother can, by all means let her. But can she? We do not hear mothers protesting that they can teach their grown-up sons and daughters better than college professors, nor their middle aged children better than their school teachers. Why, then, are they so certain that they can teach their babies better than trained baby-teachers? They are willing to consult a doctor if the baby is ill, and gladly submit to his dictation. . . . There is no wound to maternal pride in this case.

Such a sentiment is not only bad motherhood; it flies against all available economic evidence, which tells us that specialization is both natural and beneficial.⁵³

It is a pretty sentiment that the mother's love in some mysterious way makes all she does for the child superior to what another can do. But apply the test of fact. Can she, with all her love, make as good a shoe as the shoemaker, as good a hair-brush, tooth-brush, tumbler, tea cup, pie-plate, spoon, fork, or knife, as the professional manufacturers of these things? Does mother-

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love teach her to be a good barber? Can she cut her darling's hair so as to make him happy? Can she make a good chair or table or book or window? How silly it is to imagine that this "personality" inserted between the sheets makes the bed more conducive to healthy sleep than any other clean, well-aired, well-made bed!

And it's not good for the children, either, to grow up isolated and individually, which makes us "unnecessarily selfish," because "each child is so the focus of family attention all the time." Organized child care, performed by trained professionals, would free mothers and fathers alike, and would produce a generation of happier, healthier children. "A number of little ones together for part of every day, having their advantages in common, learning from infancy to say 'we' instead of 'I,' would grow up far better able to fill their places as helpful and happy members of society."⁵⁴

Throughout the book, Gilman pauses to champion specific reforms besides child care. She counsels against corporal punishment, and in favor of parents' explaining to their children the reasons for their commands or requests. Despite her general uneasiness with the subject, Gilman also advises frank and honest discussion about sex and reproduction.

In *The Home* (1903), she turns her attention once more to motherhood, this time in relation to the

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house itself, and not as much its younger inhabitants. In a book that Gilman herself called "the most heretical—and the most amusing—of anything I've done,"⁵⁵ she argues that the home as presently organized is an evolutionary throwback, derived from an earlier time, a living anachronism that is no longer necessary.

More than half a century before Betty Friedan coined the term "the feminine mystique," Gilman was already tearing down the walls of women's "arbitrary imprisonment." And, like Friedan, Gilman argued that such "exclusive confinement" in the home made the woman less a person, that a "mental myopia" comes over her as she focuses only on the proximate, to the exclusion of the visionary.⁵⁶ This makes the woman far less attractive to her husband than misty ideology might suggest. "We are taught that man most loves and admires the domestic type of woman," she writes. "This is one of the roaring jokes of history. The breakers of hearts, the queens of romance, the goddesses of a thousand devotees, have not been cooks." In fact, she argues, if a man loves his wife, "it is in spite of the home—not because of it."⁵⁷

Not only does the current organization of the home make little emotional sense, it makes virtually no economic sense. The individual woman is expected to be a master of a "swarming heap of rudimentary trades." But why? We don't expect each

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person to make his or her own shoes, do we? Then why would we expect everyone to cook their own meals? Think of it this way, she writes in an article a year later:⁵⁸

We take half the people of the world and set them to wait upon the other half, thus limiting the output of their labor exactly as it would that of a lumber camp if half the men were assigned to wait upon the other half instead of chopping wood; or of an army if half the soldiers were "keeping tent" instead of fighting; or of a ship's crew if half the sailors were cooks.

She calculates that the traditional nuclear family—with working husband and a full-time domesticated wife—is three times more costly than what is necessary to meet the same needs. What waste! And who can afford it?

If women worked outside the home, she calculates, the husband would be "relieved of two-thirds of his expenses; provided with double supplies; properly fed and more comfortable at home than he even dreamed of being, and associated with a strong, free, stimulating companion all through life, will be able to work to far better purpose in the social service, and with far greater power, pride, and enjoyment."⁵⁹

In this book, Gilman also raises a new issue, one to which she will return in later works, especially

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her fiction: violence against women. Though she was not the first to explore the question of domestic violence or marital rape, her emphasis that the origins of such abuses were to be found not in demented, perverse, or evil individuals, or in "demon rum," but in the structure of the arrangements between women and men, and especially in women's economic dependence on men, were astonishingly new, and would resound across the twentieth century as women became increasingly aware of the severity and the extent of such violence.

Here, she barely raises the issue. Women, current ideology holds, "must be guarded in the only place of safety, the home." But, she asks, "guarded from what? From men. From the womanless men who may be prowling about while all women stay at home. The home is safe because women are there. Out of doors is unsafe because women are not there. If women were there, everywhere, in the world which belongs to them as much as to men, then everywhere would be safe."⁶⁰

In her 1904 book *Human Work*, Gilman expanded on her dominant and specifically economic focus on women's plight to make broader and grander arguments about the centrality of work in human life. While she called the work "the greatest book I have ever done, and the poorest," the book echoes contemporaneous themes about dignity of work articulated by, for example, Fabian socialists and William

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Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain, and Edward Bellamy and Thorstein Veblen in the United States. Work, she argued, was the generator of life—hers is both a Marxian labor theory of value and a psychological labor theory of values—and economic independence is the prerequisite for genuine emotional and psychological autonomy for all adults, women as well as men.⁶¹

A good deal of Gilman's subsequent work, both nonfiction and fiction, had been first published in the *Forerunner*. In *The Man-Made World* (1911), serialized in the magazine in 1910, Gilman continues to develop the distinctly sociological perspective on social development also at play in *Women and Economics*. She argues that our world has been built by a sleight of hand, the substitution of the "male" for the human and the simultaneous devaluation of all that is female. Whereas her earlier works sought to elevate women to the realms of the human, in this work she also tries to bring men down to earth, restore them to their masculine specificity as opposed to pretending that they are synonymous with humanity. Gilman is going to turn the tables. If, as she writes, "men have written copiously about women, treating them always as females, with an offensiveness and falsity patent to modern minds," then she will treat "men as males in contradistinction to their qualities as human beings," but without reproducing "the abusiveness and contempt that has been

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shown to women as females." In a sense, Gilman seeks to make masculinity visible.⁶²

Its invisibility has negative consequences for both women and men. By their remaining feminine and specific, women's growth has been stunted; they live in a state of perpetual "arrested development," since they "cannot develop humanly, as he has, through social contact, social service, true social life." And for him, his personality is disfigured, his capacity for love and compassion muted, his family a "despotism."

Much of the book is taken up with observing the effects of "the unbridled dominance of one sex" in every arena she can think of—from child rearing (she discusses children's games, toys, and dolls) to education, to ethics and religion. Currently, she observes—presciently, given today's discussions about the academic "canon"—we discuss "women's literature" and its difference from "literature." Do we have a parallel of "masculine literature"? Gilman asks. Of course not, because "men are people! Women, being 'the sex' have their limited feminine interests, their feminine point of view, which must be provided for. Men, however, are not restricted—to them belongs the world's literature!"⁶³

This critique of the false equation *man* = *world*; *women* = *her sex* resounds across other works that came later. For example, in *Herland*, Gilman gives full force to her rage at the difference:⁶⁴

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When we say *men*, *man*, *manly*, *manhood*, and all the other masculine derivatives, we have in the background of our minds a huge vague crowded picture of the world and all its activities. To grow up and “be a man,” to “act like a man,”—the meaning and connotation is wide indeed. That vast background is full of marching columns of men, of changing lines of men, of long processions of men; of men steering their ships into new seas, exploring unknown mountains, breaking horses, herding cattle, ploughing and sowing and reaping, toiling at the forge and furnace, digging in the mine, building roads and bridges and high cathedrals, managing great businesses, teaching in all the colleges, preaching in all the churches; of men everywhere doing everything—“the world.”

And when we say *women*, we think *female*—the sex.

Finally, in *His Religion and Hers* (1923), she explores how androcentric religion has distorted the spiritual impulse. Anticipating many contemporary spiritual feminist writers, Gilman argues that a feminist religion would be very different from the current masculinist one—a “birth-based” religion as opposed to a “death-based” religion, organized through the “immediate altruism” of the mother and child rather than the “posthumous egotism” of masculine

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immortality, and focused on the question "What must be done for the child who is born?" rather than "What happens to me after I die?"—the signal trademark of all masculine religions.⁶⁵

In her nonfiction work, Gilman invariably describes women made weak, helpless, and feeble by economic dependence. But in her fiction, she was able to envision a stronger, bolder, more assertive femininity. For example, *What Diantha Did* (1910) describes the transformation of household economy and early childhood socialization by an independently minded woman. Gilman's *Forerunner* fiction consistently offers heroines who exemplify the need for full, independent identities, even after matrimony. In her many short stories about marriage, when mates or potential mates will not "love them and encourage [women] to be creative, contributing members of society . . . the message from Gilman is clear: don't marry."⁶⁶ And *Unpunished*, a long-unpublished murder mystery (circa 1929), utilizes the popular detective genre to explore the contrast between despotic and egalitarian marriage. That work centers around the murder of Mr. Vaughn, "the utmost manifestation of a dissolute patriarchy," a tyrannical patriarch, who has committed fraud, blackmail, and marital rape, and kept women and children virtual hostages. Solving the mystery are a husband-and-wife detective team, Jim and Bess Hunt, who share housework, and divide labor ac-

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according to their respective abilities, not their respective genders. They respect each other's work; their complementary skills enable them to solve a mystery neither could have solved alone.⁶⁷

This theme of strong, independent women is most fully realized, of course, in *Herland*, perhaps Gilman's most justly famous work of fiction. The book, now a feminist classic, is a utopian novel in which Gilman invites us to imagine the possibilities of women's unfettered development if they were completely free of any dependence on men, even for biological reproduction.

Herland is one of three feminist utopias originally published in the *Forerunner*, a group that includes as well *Moving the Mountain* (1911) and *Herland's* sequel, *With Her in Ourland* (1916).⁶⁸ The women of Herland are strong, healthy, vibrant, and athletic, energized by "a sunny breeze of freedom." Here child care is collectively organized and professionalized (since all women in Herland have a desire for motherhood, but not all women are well suited for it); there is no poverty, no crime, no violence. There is no sentimentalized home to imprison, no marketplace competition to divide, no God to fear and obey—since they live in a virtual heaven on earth, the women of Herland have no need to believe in some abstraction called heaven.⁶⁹

Less obvious, but no less central to Gilman's pro-

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ject, is her description of the three men who inadvertently stumble into Herland. These men capture three very different responses of American men to feminist reforms at the turn of the century.⁷⁰ Terry Nicholson is wealthy and arrogant, an unreconstructed patriarch, a "gay Lothario" who eventually commits marital rape and is exiled from the feminist paradise. Jeff Margrave accepts the women's ways a bit too readily and far too uncritically for Gilman's tastes; his "exalted gallantry" marks him as "something of a traitor." (To be sure, Gilman tells us, Margrave had something of "a following" among some of the women, but it was always the "more sentimental" and "less practical" ones who liked him.) Vandyck Jennings, the narrator, is a sociologist—rational, thoughtful, and careful. His conversion to the ways of Herland is considered and cautious, based on a judicious weighing of empirical evidence; he neither resists, nor does he become a sycophantic acolyte.⁷¹

It is Jennings who finds the women of Herland almost "inconveniently reasonable," especially compared to the women to whom he had become accustomed. Having now observed women's unfettered development, Jennings realizes that his (and our) definition of femininity is "not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity—developed to please us because they had to please us." In fact, Jennings

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muses, men don't really like women very much at all.⁷²

We talk fine things about women, but in our hearts we know that they are very limited beings—most of them. We honor them for their functional power, even while we dishonor them by our use of it; we honor them for their carefully enforced virtue, even when we show by our own conduct how little we think of that virtue; we value them, sincerely, for the perverted maternal activities which make our wives the most comfortable of servants, bound to us for life with the wages wholly at our own decision, their whole business, outside of the temporary duties of such motherhood as they may achieve, to meet our needs in every way. Oh, we value them, all right, “in their place.”

It was from her place, that pedestal of reverence and contempt, from which Gilman sought to dislodge woman, to make her at once more human, active, and alive.

One other theme jumps out at the contemporary reader of *Herland*—Gilman's antipathy for and discomfort with sexuality. With one foot planted firmly in nineteenth-century Victorian morality, Gilman

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could not easily step into twentieth-century sexual liberation. In the novel, sexuality causes problems for all three of the newlywed couples and sets in motion the events that lead to their expulsion from paradise.

After their wedding, and without guile or affect, Jennings's wife, Ellador, asks him:⁷³

"You mean—that with you—love between man and woman expresses itself in that way—without regard to motherhood? To parentage, I mean," she added carefully.

"Yes, surely. It is love we think of—the deep sweet love between two. Of course we want children, and children come—but that is not what we think about."

"But—but—it seems so against nature!" she said. "None of the creatures we know do that."

Personally, Gilman seems to have been a relative stranger to the pleasures of sexual passion. Whether this is because she was deeply, secretly, lesbian, as her biographers suggest (with her attraction to women emerging only once in her life), or because of the psychological consequences of her bout with postpartum depression and neurasthenia, or because, like some other feminists of her day, Gilman believed that "sexual freedom led to another form of female subordination,"⁷⁴ one cannot be certain.

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But it is clear that she held a lifelong distaste for sexual desire and activity.

And wherever it came from, Gilman seems to have been even theoretically antipathetic to the *idea* of sexual liberation for women. In various of her *Forerunner* stories, sex is a male force and seduction a man's game; she often wrote in part to reveal "the cruel disproportion between his 'fun' and that life-long injury and shame inflicted on a foolish, ignorant girl."⁷⁵ Even marital sexuality seems to have been misguided, damaging, or somewhat distasteful to her. None of the married couples in *Herland* manages actually to have sex, and in *Unpunished* what might appear to some as marital sex is exposed as rape and abuse. What Gilman did not see, as Rosalind Rosenberg writes, was that the sexual revolution of the first decades of the century "gave women something that was essential to their eventual liberation: a broader conception of their own physical needs and a greater confidence in their ability to control their physical destiny."⁷⁶

In part this political antipathy may have come from her resolutely economic emphasis. It was through economic independence that women would become free; sexual expression might prove a distraction from the pursuit of their economic liberation. It may have simply been that sexual freedom is such an individual solution to what Gilman saw as a social problem. Feminism required social trans-

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formation, and sexual freedom was a way to express personal freedom that would, or at least could, leave existing social arrangements in place. Or it may be that Gilman felt that any sexual pleasure to be taken under existing circumstances would invariably be based upon motives and criteria derived from women's economic dependency, and could therefore not be a true expression of her real sexuality.

Regardless of her motives, or its permutations, sexuality as a mode of personal expression or as an aspect of liberation played little role in Gilman's vision of the future. Here she parted company with many of the radicals, socialists, and feminists with whom she shared so much. While many of them turned to Freud as a personal corollary to the collective social transformation offered by socialism, Gilman remained disgusted by his ideas, put off by "our absurd Sexolatry" derived from his "illogical assertions," and she declared his influence "evil" in a lecture entitled "The Fallacy of Freud."⁷⁷

Gilman's sexual Victorianism was coupled with several other themes that may be problematic for modern readers. These themes hover at the edge of *Women and Economics* and emerge more fully in other works. In this book, she stresses the intersection of class and gender, but pays little attention to race. In fact, it is an inescapable conclusion that when Gilman referred to "the race," meaning humanity as a whole, she envisioned the white race

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(though it seems a bit of a strain to claim that she meant it to be understood as a racialized concept).⁷⁸ In various works, she specifies other races, especially blacks, as inferior, occupying a lower rung on a grand human evolutionary ladder, echoing the very social Darwinist sentiments that she despised when applied to gender. Especially in her private letters and diaries, but scattered throughout her writings in the *Forerunner* and elsewhere, Gilman invoked racist ideas, moved too easily to racist examples, and drew upon racist themes. One senses, as her biographer Ann Lane writes, that Gilman felt that "all of these strange people with their odd customs and language and look were not quite as good as her people."⁷⁹

On the other hand, she occasionally discredits explicitly racist themes. In *Herland*, for example, Gilman puts racist sentiments only in Terry's mouth, so that the unreconstructed misogynist is also unmasked as a racist, down to the songs he hums. And the fact that "we have cheated the Indian, oppressed the African, robbed the Mexican," Gilman wrote in the *Forerunner*, "is ground for shame." And, as Lane also points out, at the 1903 convention of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association, Gilman's was the sole dissenting voice raised in opposition to a literacy requirement for the vote, frequently a racist ploy to continue the disenfranchisement of blacks.⁸⁰

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Gilman's ambivalent racism was frequently complemented by an often virulent nativism: she believed that healthy, native-born American stock would be gradually displaced (though she did not fear dilution through intermarriage) by "lesser" peoples streaming in from other countries—particularly from Germany, Russia, Poland, and southern Europe—at the turn of the century. Though she believed that some peoples were superior to others, she dissented from the eugenics movement that urged restricted breeding of these "lower races" because she felt that differences among races were social in origin, not biological.

Her major nativist nemesis remained the Jews. Gilman's anti-Semitism was pronounced and consistent throughout her life. Claiming that New York City, where she had never enjoyed living, had become one-third Jewish by 1920, she declared herself pleased to leave, to "escape forever this hideous city—and its Jews. The nervewearing noise—the dirt—the ugliness, the steaming masses in the subway." Her anti-Semitism again surfaced when she considered the Russian Revolution. Bolshevism, she said, was a "Russian-Jewish nightmare."⁸¹

In his 1966 introduction, Carl Degler assessed the value of *Women and Economics* both within the context of the emerging Second Wave of the women's movement, and within Gilman's work as a whole.

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He suggested that Gilman's strength was in her social analysis, her sociology, and that she "showed little talent for imaginative writing" (although he does suggest that "The Yellow Wallpaper" was passable).⁸² Such an assessment is, perhaps, a bit harsh, given the enduring popularity not only of that single short story, but also of *Herland*, which continues to find an audience of readers eager to believe that things would be altogether different (and better) if women ruled the world, or, even more simply, if they lived in a world without men.

Yet much of Gilman's other fiction suffers from a narrative style that can be both plodding and unstable by turns, even in a very short story, and from an incessant, often intrusive didacticism. The recent publication of two more of her novels, the detective story *Unpunished* and *Herland's* sequel, *With Her in Ourland*, provides ample evidence that Gilman's strengths lay elsewhere.⁸³ These are useful novels more for their contribution to the biographical portrait of their author than for their deft narrative, complex characterization, or even propelling plot lines.

In her own time, Gilman had been a major thinker and writer, a leading public intellectual. In the 1960s, she had jibed with Second Wave readers who brought to *Women and Economics* the concerns of a generation of women who felt themselves, as Gilman had, trapped in the home, who yearned, as

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Gilman did, to have a larger, public life, a life of meaningful work, of economic independence.

Today, women have earned those rights. Women have entered the workplace, the professions, the military, in unprecedented numbers. Women maintain the right to pursue their ambitions without harassment or discrimination, to insist on lives free of the threat of rape or violence, the right to enjoy sexual liberty and, however precariously, the right to choose.

To be sure, they still face significant obstacles to their complete entry into the public sphere, still face harassment and a multitude of minor and major discriminations, still fear rape and violence, still fear that their right to choose may be further eroded or compromised by those to whom women's autonomy is a threat. But there is also no question that women today feel themselves entitled to as full a public life and as full a sense of independence and integrity as men feel.

But their entry into the public arena has not brought women the liberation that Gilman, or Betty Friedan, predicted. Today's readers bring new and different concerns to Gilman's text—concerns born of the frustration that economic autonomy has not yet been won, and that the economic freedoms thus far gained have not translated into commensurate progress toward women's equality. An earlier generation believed that women needed to be freed

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from the home; today's women want to move easily and freely *between* home and work, comfortably balancing economic and family life.

Gilman understood that woman's freedom would require more than simply throwing open the doors of the homes that imprisoned her; it would require the transformation of the workplace and also the transformation of the home. The workplace was not a gender-neutral site, into which women, once liberated from the home, would simply integrate themselves. The workplace was, and continues to be, a male domain; it is no wonder that it also bears the marks of that now-visible identity. The workplace is a gendered arena, and women's success in that arena continues to be largely based on their ability to negotiate its masculine precepts and values.

In order for women to integrate into the workplace while maintaining a sense of themselves in their own terms, the workplace will have to change. It will need to become attuned to a more inclusive constellation of approaches, and become more "family-friendly," developing those mechanisms that enable workers to balance work and family successfully. And Gilman understood much of this. She advocated parental leave, for example, long before the Family and Medical Leave Act was a twinkle in any legislator's eye. "A year's vacation should be taken with each baby," she wrote in an essay in 1923.⁸⁴

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And she understood also that in order for women to be able to achieve economic independence, home and family life would have to be transformed, and that both structural and emotional changes were necessary. Her proposals for professionalized child care and organized and well-funded nurseries are finally becoming realities across the nation, while her more sweeping architectural innovations, like cooperative kitchens in urban apartments, remain on the experimental fringe of the American way of life.

And Gilman also understood that the home was not the safe "haven in a heartless world" that romantic sentimentalists had sold to women as the justification for the separation of spheres in the first place. Today's readers know that the home is the site of terror and violence against women as well, that more rapes and murders of women occur in the home than in any other place, that the men most likely to commit rape are either those to whom the women are married or those they are dating, and that nearly one-third of all women are, at some point, hit by their husbands. As early as the 1870s, Gilman protested men's violence and how it was used to keep women in their place. Once, when she had refused a male escort's offer to see her safely home, he remarked to her, somewhat bewildered, "But any man would be glad to protect a woman. Man is a woman's natural protector!" "Against

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what?" she asked. In her novels, like *Herland* and *Unpunished*, and in several of her essays and books, Gilman protested against the violence and the threat of violence that hold women back—both collectively and individually.

This leads to a last issue that contemporary readers bring to her work today. For women to be free of violence, for women to be free to pursue their economic autonomy in the public sphere and also to have the rich family lives they say they want, *men* are going to have to change as well. Men will have to cease seeing themselves as the unexamined norm, and begin to enlarge the meanings of masculinity to include those emotions and behaviors—nurturing, love, emotional intimacy, care—that have defined domestic life. To be sure, women's emancipation has been women's project, but if women are going to "have it all," men are going to have to share the work. Few feminist writers in the mid-1960s, let alone in 1898, understood the relationship between women's freedom and the changes for men; fewer still would have advocated them. But Gilman believed, as the famous labor song put it, "the rising of the women is the rising of the race."⁸⁵ And she well understood the portent of the feminist movement for men.

At the beginning of the century, Charlotte Perkins Gilman proclaimed the twentieth century as "the woman's century"—the century of her eman-

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cipation from the home and from economic dependence on men. A century of struggle and activism has produced only part of that emancipation, and it remains for the next generation of readers, in the next century, to grasp feminism's emancipatory promise. Now is another moment, as Gilman pronounced then, the "chance for the mother of the world to rise to her full place, her transcendent power to remake humanity, to rebuild the suffering world—and the world waits while she powders her nose."⁸⁶

NOTES

1. Carl Degler, "Introduction," in Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Women and Economics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. xiii.
2. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Passing of Matrimony," in *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1906, p. 496.
3. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (New York: Charlton Company, 1903), p. 129.
4. Floyd Dell, "Feminism for Men," in *The Masses*, volume 5, number 20 (July 1917); reprinted in Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mosmiller, eds., *Against the Tide: Profeminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990, a Documentary History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp. 364, 361. Of course, to Gilman it *did* matter which half was the poorer half—at least men had the thrill of public participation—and if forced to choose between those halves, she would not have hesitated.

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5. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 83.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 91.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 89. The "black helplessness" with its "deadness of heart, its aching emptiness of mind," which she felt, might have been what is now called postpartum depression. See, for example, Verta Taylor, *Rock-a-By Baby* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
9. See, for example, "On Advertising for Marriage," in *Alpha*, volume 2, and "The Answer," in *Woman's Journal*, volume 17, number 40 (October 2, 1886).
10. *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 95.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
12. Gary Scharnhorst, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1985).
13. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland: A Lost Feminist Utopian Novel*, ed. Ann J. Lane (New York: Pantheon, 1979), p. vi.
14. *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 186.
15. Though "The Yellow Wallpaper" is now considered her finest work of fiction, she searched for two years to find a publisher. The story had been turned down by Howells when he was editor of the *Atlantic* in 1892, though he later included it in his collection *Great Modern Stories* in 1920.
16. As in Marx's famous epigram that "men make their own history," echoed in his most famous articulation of this social constructionist position, in the preface to his 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where he writes that "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their being which determines their consciousness."
17. *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 187.
18. In fact, she was antipathetic to much of the socialist planning of her era. A visit to the socialist community at Rus-

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kin, Tennessee, for example, made her think it was simply "another of those sublimely planned, devoutly joined, and invariably deserted Socialist colonies. Only ignorance of the real nature of social relations can account for these high-minded idiocies." See *ibid.*, p. 252.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
20. *Forerunner*, volume 7 (November 1916), p. 287.
21. *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 316. The couple lived mostly on the Upper West Side. Of their last apartment, on Riverside Drive between 94th and 95th St., she wrote that "if the flat had had suitable closets, and if the other inhabitants had not encouraged New York's little traveling pets, it would have been about perfect" (p. 296). Since the editors of this volume live quite nearby, we can attest that little has changed since Charlotte's days.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
23. *Forerunner*, volume 1 (December 1909), p. 33.
24. Larry Ceplair cites Gilman's own estimation of circulation in *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 188. See also Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "A Summary of Purpose," *Forerunner*, volume 7 (November 1916), p. 287.
25. Ceplair, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (above, n. 24), p. 190. See also, Gilman, *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 305.
26. *The Living*, p. 333.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Zona Gale, "Foreword" to *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. xxxi.
30. Both Addams and Kelley are cited in Mary A. Hill, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of a Radical Feminist, 1860-1896* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), p. 295.
31. Henry Brown Blackwell, review of *Women and Economics*, in *Woman's Journal*, June 25, 1898, p. 204; Arthur Wood-

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- ford, *Dial*, February 1, 1899, p. 85; *Nation*, June 8, 1899, p. 433.
32. *Nation*, June 8, 1899; *London Daily Chronicle*, June 26, 1899.
33. *New York Times Saturday Review of Books*, November 5, 1898, p. 738; *Literary World*, December 24, 1898, p. 451; *Chicago Tribune*, May 24, 1914.
34. Mabel Hurd, review in *Political Science Quarterly*, volume 14 (December 1899), p. 712; *Independent*, January 26, 1899, p. 283.
35. *Westminster Gazette*, August 29, 1899; *New York City Review of Literature*, August 19, 1933.
36. Below, pp. 14–15.
37. Below, pp. 20–21.
38. Below, pp. 43–44.
39. Below, p. 75.
40. Below, pp. 63–64.
41. Below, pp. 86, 88–89, 87.
42. Below, p. 219.
43. Below, p. 290.
44. *Ibid.*
45. Below, pp. 293–94.
46. Below, p. 312.
47. Below, p. 115.
48. Below, p. 269.
49. Below, p. 212.
50. Below, pp. 236, 237.
51. Below, pp. 312, 340.
52. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Concerning Children* (Boston: Small, Maynard, and Co., 1900), p. 42.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
55. *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 286.
56. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Home* (New York: McClure, Phillips, and Co., 1903), pp. 22, 23, 216.

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57. Ibid., pp. 280, 281.
58. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Domestic Economy," in the *Independent*, June 16, 1904, p. 1161.
59. *The Home* (above, n. 56), pp. 320, 322.
60. Ibid., p. 254.
61. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Human Work* (New York: McClure, Phillips, and Co., 1904). Gilman's assessment of the book is in *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 275.
62. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World* (New York: Charlton Company, 1911), p. 8. This project coincides with that of one of the editors of this volume. Kimmel argues that one of the mechanisms by which male domination is perpetuated is that masculinity is equated with humanity—we use the generic male pronoun, for example—and thus the specificity of masculinity remains invisible. See, for example, Michael Kimmel, "Invisible Masculinity," in *Society*, September 1993, pp. 28–35; and the introduction to *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
63. *The Man-Made World* (above, n. 62), p. 91.
64. Gilman, *Herland* (above, n. 13), p. 137.
65. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *His Religion and Hers* (New York: Century and Company, 1923), p. 50.
66. Aleta Cane, "The Heroine of Her Own Story: Appropriation and Subversion of Mass Media Marriage Plots in Three Short Stories from the *Forerunner*," unpublished paper delivered at the Second International Charlotte Perkins Gilman Conference, June 26–28, 1997, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, p. 8.
67. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Unpunished*, edited and with an afterword by Catherine J. Golden and Denise D. Knight (New York: Feminist Press, 1997), p. 218.
68. See Carol Farley Kessler, *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her Progress Toward Utopia, with Selected Writings* (Syracuse:

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- Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 36. See also Lane's account of the genre of the utopia in *Herland* (above, n. 13), pp. xii, xix–xxiii.
69. *Herland* (above, n. 13), pp. 99, 82.
70. See Michael Kimmel, "Men's Responses to Feminism at the Turn of the Century," *Gender & Society*, volume 1, number 2 (1987), pp. 261–83.
71. *Herland* (above, n. 13), pp. 124, 89, 51.
72. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
74. Lane, *Herland* (above, n. 13), p. xvi.
75. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "His Mother," *Forerunner*, July 1914, pp. 169–73. Reprinted in Denise D. Knight, ed., *The Yellow Wall-Paper and Selected Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1994), p. 74.
76. Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 206.
77. See Ann J. Lane, *To "Herland" and Beyond: The Life and Work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), pp. 332, 352. Lane attributes Gilman's antipathy to a simpler motive—her distrust that male doctors were using psychological insights to oppress women further. While doubtless true, this argument downplays Gilman's opposition to sexual liberation as the source of her antipathy to Freud's ideas.
78. For an excessively politically correct reading of Gilman's racism, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
79. See Lane, *To "Herland"* (above, n. 77), p. 256.
80. He sings, "The things that I learned from the yellow and black / They 'ave helped me a 'eap with the white": *Herland* (above, n. 13), p. 131. Note also his mock working-
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class accent in the song, as Gilman is attributing such sentiments to the aristocratic, misogynist Nicholson mouthing a working-class, imperialist racism. None but the most determinedly myopic and ideologically blindered reader could possibly mistake her recitation as anything but critical. See also Lane, *To "Herland"* (above, n. 77), p. 256.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 337; Gilman, *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 320.
82. Degler, "Introduction" (above, n. 1), p. xviii.
83. See Gilman, *Unpunished* (above, n. 67); and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *With Her in Ourland* (New York: Praeger, 1997).
84. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The New Generation of Women," *Current History*, August 18, 1923, p. 734.
85. Dell, "Feminism for Men," in Kimmel and Mosmiller, eds., *Against the Tide* (above, n. 4), p. 361.
86. *The Living* (above, n. 5), p. 331.