Shattering Sanity: The Art of Men's Oppression

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The etymological link for the word ‘hysteria’ derives from the Greek Word for ‘uterus,’ and in its historical association, it has perpetuated a preconceived connection between women and madness. The correlation of societal perceptions of madness in the early 20th century reflects the connection with the implementation of rhetoric, solidifying the stereotype of insanity. Therefore, the rhetoric contributed to the marginalization of women who dared to challenge established gender norms. In the experiences of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the author of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and suffragist Alice Paul, the association of the female body was marked by pathologizing actions of societal oppression, constraining the women who opposed an unyielding society.

The nature of the relationship between women and madness adheres to the contestation of ‘mental illness’ as a forceful request for help, manifesting both a cultural and political castration. The defined social need and help-seeking practices are part of female conditioning, ideologically inheriting the dependent behavioral pattern.[1] This psychological condition in Western discourse follows not women’s but men's philosophy and psychological concepts on femininity.[2] The result is a traditional male-centered orientation of feminists and an anti-feminine bias, subjecting women to a subordinate self through a hierarchical manner. The metaphor used for women as an opposite of men is the ”other.” In its negative meaning, the identity of the “other” is the absence of a masculine presence: deficiency and incompleteness. However, the conception of otherness is blind to a woman's actual difference, unknowing of the woman's assertion and reasoning that considers their unique experiences of anatomical changes and their historical suppression.

[1]Shoshana Felman, “Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy” *Diacritics* Vol. 5, No. 4, (Winter 1975) 2-10
[2]Shoshana Felman, “Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy” *Diacritics* Vol. 5, No. 4, (Winter 1975) 2-10

To the "other," speech is not a given. To speak in the name of women, in place of a silent woman, or using the inherited male language of men as a woman is specifically the call in which men observe their dominance.[3] The precise expression made for women is a gesture of rulings, throughout which men have reduced women to the status of silent and subordinate, such as suffragettes being arrested for peaceful protests. However, in the persuasive power of literary works and political movements in the early 20th century, the defining factor of a woman's break from male thought is their opposition to silence. This symbolic step, viewed as an invitation to madness, is the disconnect from societal gender norms- a feminist revolution that lets women speak for themselves.[4]

With respect to women's madness, the male reasoning looks to appropriate it, claiming to understand it through a male perspective, which reduces the madwomen to a spectacle that can be contained.[5] The conditions that curate the extent of the "other" are furthered in the eyes of male control, defining insanity as a lack of resemblance to a masculine universe. In the history of the anatomical state and the male understanding of it, the limit of a woman's sanity is the sex organ by which her reproductive functions push women to the criminal category.[6] The insanity of the 19th-century sociological explanation of puerperal insanity, made by male physicians with limited medical knowledge of insanity, allowed the uterus to "enclose the perpetual possibility of hysteria." [7]

Stories, such as the 1892 "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, address puerperal insanity in a public and dramatic rendition of female mental health through its

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[3]Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy" 2-10 [4]Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy" 2-10 [5]Felman, "Women and Madness: The Critical Fallacy" 2-10

[6]G.J Barker-Benfield, *The horrors of the half-known life: Male attitudes toward women and sexuality in 19th. Century America* (Routledge, 2004), 122-125.

[7]Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A history of Insanity In the Age of Reason (*New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 146.

breakdown of a young woman, Jane. In its first-person narrative, traces of her declining mental health and development of psychosis present the problem of suffering through the representation of the wallpaper. The situation of Jane's confinement begins with the treatment of the rest cure, designed to treat depression by focusing on the symptoms, not the cause. The cure enforced bed rest, subjecting patients to imprisonment beyond what we expected, as Jane's small liberty of writing was removed. In this treatment of a nervous disorder, the focus on acute exhaustion is emphasized. In its repressive intention of rest, the medical treatment is of male control over women's minds and bodies– a further containment of female identity.

The containment and the policing of identity to form the exclusivity of the other is a recognizable loss of reality. Throughout the story, the wallpaper is described as ripped, designed in ugly hues, and hiding a woman; however, despite the various representations made by the wallpaper and the madness it creates, the sole indicator of madness in the short story is the loss of self.[8] Throughout different points in the short story, Jane is adamant nothing is wrong with her and that the isolation she is receiving does more harm than good, yet she is still dismissed by her husband. While it is a natural response to say her husband is also a physician and, therefore, looks out for her safety, the husband embodies male control. Having already asserted his power of control over his wife, the further masculine justification of his ruling is done by his occupation.[9] In her isolated state, Jane is subjected to unknown perception, furthering her state as the "other,' creating a woman in the wallpaper she is adamant to pull out, "there are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will."[10] The further stages of a constructed madness

[8]Akiko Kimura, ""A Story on the Verge-Charlotte Perkins Gilmans Narrative of Madness in "The Yellow Wallpaper," *The journal of Psychoanalytical Study of English Language and Literature* 2005, no. 25 (2005): 13-26.
[9] Kimura, ""A Story on the Verge-Charlotte Perkins Gilmans Narrative of Madnes,"13-26.
[10]Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New England Magazine, 1892).

begin to form the female figure behind the wallpaper that seeks to leave the imprisonment as an extension of Jane.

The imprisonment of the cold room, forming her sense of madness through the bars that imprison her mind and body, is coupled with an already existing sad mind formed by puerperal insanity and constant observation. What used to be a room she hoped to design gradually develops into an incarceration from which the woman in the wallpaper ultimately presses Jane into her madness. In her isolated world, her insanity and hatred, which will eventually turn her, become a distinct feature in her creeping actions of mania. The hatred for the room, in addition to the rancid yellow smell of the wallpaper and the female figure she sees, drives Jane to rip and tear at the wallpaper, removing the surveillance that once entrapped her mind.[11] However, her failure to remove all of it and its hold on her causes her to penetrate the wallpaper and find the central tower where she observes lies– "I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard!"[12] Now a mad woman who has seeped into the wallpaper she once hated, Jane is reduced to a paranoid schizophrenic who becomes the woman she once imagined as she writes, " 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!" [13]

At the end of the short story, the collateral damage done to the fainting husband overcomes Jane's containment and silencing, using the room as a womb to birth a new self of freedom. In her uncanny madness, Jane is reduced to animalistic behavior.[14] However, the new and unknown being she has become cannot be controlled as she once was, physically overpowering the oppressive treatment set by the authority figure in her life. In believing she has

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[11] John S. Bak, "Escaping the jaundiced eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'." *Studies in Short Fiction* 31, no. 1 (1994): 39

[12] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New England Magazine, 1892).

[13]Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (New England Magazine, 1892).

[14]Kimura, ""A Story on the Verge-Charlotte Perkins Gilmans Narrative of Madnes,"13-26.

broken out of her prison, both in her containment and patriarchal society that has instilled a restraint of her freedom, Jane has grown into her insanity, separating herself from both society and self, devoid of the identity laid by her husband and his patriarchal society.[15]

While "The Yellow Wallpaper" is fiction, the stifling contrast of confinement echoes to broaden social struggles for women by using overtly political or didactic messages to attack a paternalistic society that confines women. In its literary text, Gilman expresses a fusion of private views of madness and a public display of feminist assertion, much like suffragists, whose written prison experiences mirrored the social constraints of patriarchal norms.

Furthering the notion of policing identities and the suppression of voices, male panic and misunderstanding of mental illness with feminism allows torture and sterilization to silence active voices. The emergence of the hysterical female of America's 1910 suffrage movement coined the term "child-woman," presented in "The Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*,"* to assert the effects of male-dominated culture. The term describes the medical and mental discourse of women as being highly attention-seeking, unpredictable, and following self-punishing behavior of independence.[16] This is better yet seen in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's experience with puerperal insanity and fear of being seen as mad that found itself in the pages of "The Yellow Wallpaper," reflecting on the anguish of women silenced by societal expectations.[17]The description reflects the Victorian feminine behavior of threatening the patriarchy, strongly discouraging women from their 'manly' pursuits of education, strength, and politics.[18] Rather than having women fight for the rights stripped of them at birth, the male need encouraged nurturing, entertainment, and submissiveness to tame the unfeminine violence that

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[15]Kimura, ""A Story on the Verge-Charlotte Perkins Gilmans Narrative of Madnes,"13-26.
[16]Julianna Little, "Frailty, thy name is woman": Depictions of Female Madness" (masters thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012), 20-30.
[17]"Charlotte Perkins Gilman," *Connecticut History, accessed November 26.*
[18]Julianna Little, "Frailty, thy name is woman," 20-30.

engaged curiosity and vulgar behavior in women. The conflicting characteristics of male needs punished any defiance to their expectations of a woman's life, heavily subjecting their desires to marriage and childbearing, reducing women to their patriarchal value of discipline.

In its defiance of social discipline through political actions, women's suffrage was deemed menacing, a threat to society. What seemed to be the rule for women's hysteria and mental disorder derived from an unfit domestic role, a non-subservient woman to male needs. The anti-suffragist propaganda that emerged from the political stance and men's hatred for it depicted women as mentally unstable and criminal, deeming it easier to lock them away for hysteria than to allow changes to give women a vote.[19] The rhetoric that deemed these women insane and unlawful helped to proclaim women as emotional, unsteady in the head, and a danger to society, allowing them to be delegitimized by opponents, further suppressing their voices. In the writing of Elizabeth Packard, an advocate for suffrage and mental health, she describes female independence as madness. In her time at an asylum, the received medical wisdom was that assertive women were unnatural and, therefore, mentally impaired.[20] In Packer's writing, she recounts the most popular way to assert power over patients was to use chloroform to effectively quiet women, and in a doctor's words– "not only temporarily, but permanently."[21] Additionally, the writing and medical notes show the standard for constraining disobedient women was through straitjackets that were "rarely necessary among males."[22] The experience and writing reflect the same actions as suffragists who were condemned to force-feeding.

In its militant operation, the suffrage movement, as led by Alice Paul, engaged in hunger strikes to follow male-dominated patriarchal views to seek public sympathy for female bodies,

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[19]Julianna Little, "Frailty, thy name is woman," 20-30.
[20]Kate Moore, "Declared Insane for Speaking Up: The Dark American History of Silencing Women Through Psychiatry"*Time Magazine*, June 22, 2021, https://time.com/6074783/psychiatry-history-women-mental-health/
[21]Moore, "Declared Insane for Speaking Up: The Dark American History of Silencing Women Through Psychiatry."
[22]Moore, "Declared Insane for Speaking Up: The Dark American History of Silencing Women Through Psychiatry."

actively using the same vulnerable and frail rhetoric to fight back. However, the political weapon to cast prisoners as victims and the government that put them there failed. The use of men's words against them terrorized existing power structures, and the result subjected women to brutal force-feedings. The practice of force-feeding was initially devised for asylum patients. In its malpractice and horrific experience, it damaged suffragists' gums, teeth, and throats and, in a few cases, caused pneumonia.[23] The outright torture of force-feeding was objected to by suffragists who likened force-feeding to oral rape.[24] By portraying the torturous act as vindictive and ill to health, the ruling men in charge of suffragettes degraded and brutalized their political opponents, taking away their voice of freedom.[25] The proclaimed medical treatment was, in reality, not only a physical violation of autonomy but a psychological tactic made to shatter the spirits of suffragists, pushing them to their perceived madness and eroding their public stance on freedom.

Regardless of political context, the representations emerging from the force-feeding of women, specifically The Night of Terror, performed a context of unwarranted assault on the body solely for enacting discipline.[26] The Terence MacSwiney hunger strike of 1920 in Ireland showed prisoners could display a hunger strike for seventy-four days. In relation to the health of young adults, The Guardian commented that there had been no reason to force-feed suffragettes or even to believe death was creeping.[27] To call the torture method a medical treatment was thereby cynical and was done to scare suffragettes from their verbal and physical protests. The view of madness in the suffragettes, specifically the women on hunger strikes, was their deliberate need

[23]Victoria W. Wolcott, "Suffragists Used Hunger Strikes As Powerful Tools of Resistance," *UB NOW,* August 21, 2020.
[24]Ian Miller, *A history of force feeding: Hunger strikes, prisons and medical ethics, 1909-1974* (Springer Nature), 1-35
[25]Ian Miller, *A history of force feeding: Hunger strikes, prisons and medical ethics, 1909-1974*, 1-35 [26]Ian Miller, *A history of force feeding: Hunger strikes, prisons and medical ethics, 1909-1974*, 1-35 [27]Ian Miller, *A history of force feeding: Hunger strikes, prisons and medical ethics, 1909-1974*, 1-35
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to be viewed as political prisoners to obtain more prisoner rights and media attention.[28] However, in their fight for rights, their deliberate self-sabotage of malnutrition was viewed as suicidal, allowing suffragettes to be fed on the call of saving lives. In addition to the excessive treatment of stopping a never-ending political movement, prolonged media coverage, such as Alice Paul's writings and interviews, gained the subject's attention.

The intrusion into personal anatomy, as expressed by Alice Paul, states she was force-fed twice a day following the end of her hunger strike and held down by officers of the prison to make for a swift torture method.[29] In addition to the events following her strike, her refusal to wear prison clothes after having been stripped of her own and her identity warranted a cold room with the male courtesy of several blankets, which she was to wrap herself in.[30] In a dramatic rendition of history, the film “Iron Jawed Angels” follows Alice Paul and her militant suffragettes; however, the particularly interesting part of the film is its use of color to portray the suffragist movement. As the film follows Paul and a fake love life used to spruce up women's history, her clothes are colorful and show her mental state. Yet, the second she is to face outside forces, such as the cold weather the suffragists' experience while picketing a wartime president, Woodrow Wilson, her clothes become dark, but not as dark as the clothes she’s given in prison.[31] As the film moves forward and men come to contradict their fight for the vote, the characteristic of mad and insane follow, darkening her clothes along the way, coming full throttle with the black and grey prison clothes.

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[28]Sally Hunter Graham, "Woodrow Wilson, Alice Paul, and the Woman Suffrage Movement" *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 4 (1983): 665-679.

[29]Alice Paul, “Being Fed Through Nostrils Is Described by Alice Paul, Young American Suffragette,” Interview. December 1909. Courtesy of Library of Congress

[30]Alice Paul, “Being Fed Through Nostrils Is Described by Alice Paul, Young American Suffragette,” Interview. December 1909. Courtesy of Library of Congress

[31]*Iron Jawed Angels*. Films On Demand. 2004.

The early 20th-century view of women reflects societal rhetoric, attributing them to a forged sense of madness, creating a figure from which their identities were stripped away, distorting perceptions of themselves and society. Much like Jane in “The Yellow Wallpaper," suffragettes navigated their own maze of madness, with social norms as wallpaper illustrating the consequences of confinement and political oppression. The walls of their confinement, literal and metaphorical, enclosed women to a kaleidoscope of madness that unraveled the fabric of their sanity. Through an examination of notable female figures, it is evident the pathologizing of women was a means of oppression, restricting those who dared to defy social norms.

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