
REVIEWS

Julie Bates Dock, ed. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" and the History of Its Publication and Reception: A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook*. The Penn State Series in the History of the Book. General Editor, James L. W. West III. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. 132p.

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This slender casebook of an academic search turns out to be extraordinary in its reach. It publishes the first authoritative text of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper" since it was originally published in 1892 (the versions we have been teaching for decades in our classes have been unauthentic, alas!); it includes book reviews and excerpts of literary and social commentaries that reflect the story's critical reception; it publishes lists of editorial emendations and variants of the story in important editions since 1892, and it gives a listing of textual sources for more than one hundred reprintings of the story in anthologies and textbooks. This enterprise itself deserves recognition for the prodigious, painstaking scholarship and meticulous editing that have gone into the casebook production.

What impressed me most about this book, however, is its origin in an undergraduate course on scholarly editing. Julie Bates Dock gave her class a "simple collation exercise" on Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-paper." Students and teacher were fired up as they looked for relationships among various editions of the story. Their growing enthusiasm resulted in a collaborative publication by Julie Bates Dock and three of her students (Daphne Ryan Allen, Jennifer Palai, and Kristen Tracy) — an article titled "'But One Expects That': Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' and the Shifting Light of Scholarship" [which appeared in *PMLA* 111 (January 1996): 52-65].

Early in a chapter called "The Legend of 'The Yellow Wall-paper,'" Dock not only recounts how the story has become one of the perennial "best-sellers," with 225,000 copies alone of the Feminist Press' slim volume of the story with an Afterword by Elaine R. Hedges, but warns us that "In its twenty-five-year odyssey of rediscovery by literary critics, . . . the story has picked up along the way an assortment of blemishes and distortions, from textual anomalies to skewed accounts of its publication history to misinformation about its contemporary reception"

(1). This observation is sufficient provocation for any academic to dig into its critical history.

The evidence of casual distortions that change the import of original texts as shown in the present case emphasizes the importance of textual criticism and traditional modes of criticism. As Dock reiterates sentiments expressed in the original *PMLA* article, “the use of documents is affected by critical trends and by critics’ biases and expectations.... The feminist critics of the early 1970s, intent on establishing women authors in the American literary canon, had a stake in portraying the story as victimized piece of literature. The notion that Gilman suffered condemnation from editors and readers outside the story tidily echoed the narrator’s victimization within the story” (2–3). Dock cites two instances where major feminist critics came to unexamined and hasty conclusions about the publication history of the story:

“For almost fifty years,” lament Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “The Yellow Wallpaper went unprinted and unread” [*The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (New York: Norton, 1985): 1148]. Similarly, Annette Kolodny attributes the story’s lack of influence on later women authors to its being “so quickly relegated to the backwaters of our literary landscape” [‘A Map for Rereading: or, Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts,’ *New Literary History* (1980): 45]. *The print record belies these claims.* (4, emphasis mine)

In other instances, Dock provides evidence to argue that omission of a couple of words — “in marriage” for example, as in “John laughs at me, of course, but one expects that [in marriage]” — distorts Gilman’s focus. And she argues that “here she [Gilman] is bashing marriage in particular, not men in general” (7).

Other legends of the story that do not hold up well under scrutiny, as Dock points out, are that Gilman had to struggle to get her story into print, that most readers thought of it as a “ghost story,” that it received irate reception from the male medical community. Evidence does not support these beliefs. And Dock’s scholarship points out discrepancies in Gilman’s own accounts as well — her inaccurate and varying dates and titles certainly, but also her claim that Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, her own physician, changed his treatment of neurasthenia after reading “The Yellow Wall-paper.” What actually happened is worth finding out. Even in examining the cordial professional relationship between Gilman and W.D. Howells, Dock finds discrepancies that amount to “he-says/she-says conundrums” (12).

The visuals in this book are particularly helpful. Embellished with photographs of Charlotte Perkins Stetson, W.D. Howells, Horace E. Scudder, Dr. Silas Weir

Mitchell, the casebook also provides photographs of the beginning page (647) of “The Yellow Wall-paper” with a pencil sketch of the narrator sitting at the window, which appeared in *The New England Magazine* in January 1892, and a cover of the “The Yellow Wall Paper,” along with its title page (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1899). Additionally, the book includes two photographic imprints, one of a review titled “Perilous Stuff” from *Boston Evening Transcript*, and the other of two facing pages in *The Golden Book Magazine*.

There is much more in this book to hold the attention of the reader. It cites interesting excerpts from Gilman’s autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman Correspondence* (1935). It includes excerpts of relevant correspondence between CPS (Charlotte Perkins Stetson) and W.D. Howells, Horace E. Scudder who rejected the story because it made him very miserable, Dr. Brummell Jones, and, after her remarriage, correspondence between CPG (Charlotte Perkins Gilman) and W.D. Howells, cousin Lyman Beecher Stowe, E(than) A(llen) Cross, Mary L. Elting of *The Golden Book Magazine* which published the story in October 1933, and others. It explains or compiles painstaking commentaries on textual matters, selection of copy-text, publication history, authorial practice and preference, editorial methodology, along with notes on the text, editorial emendations, and many other publication matters, as well as reviews of the story that appeared in various magazine. Finally, the Appendix provides the history of the printing of “The Yellow Wall-paper” from 1892 until 1997.

A number of scholars may be interested in Dock’s elucidation of how editorial theory has undergone significant changes in the past decades, especially after the dominant school of textual editing derived from the work of W.W. Greg and Fredson Bowers. Most readers (instructors, students), however, will find the legendary and actual history and mystery generated by this story and its author most gripping.

The scholarly nature of this book belies the interest it generates in its reading. I had a hard time putting it down, I got so engrossed in Gilman’s accounts of the story’s initial publication, its frequent reprints, the remuneration she was given (and, at least in one instance, gypped of), and the reasons she gave for publishing the story, in the change she believed that its reading wrought in the medical profession, especially her own physician Dr. Silas Weiner Mitchell. In passing, we glean much about Gilman’s motivation, her aesthetics of writing, and her views on marriage and men.

Julie Bates Dock’s meticulous scholarship does not exclude her own self from scrutiny as well. “[T]he present selection of documents,” she warns us, “necessarily reflects the editor’s own interests (some would say biases), as do the annota-

tions and critical framing of those items. Readers should approach all these materials as critically as they would Gilman's fiction if they would steer clear of the twin shoals of unexamined positivism and knee-jerk skepticism" (3).

Everyone who teaches "The Yellow Wall-paper" should first circulate a copy of Julie Bates Dock's documentary casebook in their classes to pique their student-interest in the search and research propelled by an exemplary collaboration between faculty and undergraduate students and then put it on reserve in their libraries for recommended perusal. My students will get to see the book next week. ✱