THE
YELLOW WALL PAPER

IT is very seldom that mere ordinary
people like John and myself secure
ancestral halls for the summer.

A colonial mansion, a hereditary
estate, I would say a haunted house,
and reach the height of romantic
felicity, — but that would be asking
too much of fate!

Still I will proudly declare that there
is something queer about it.

Else, why should it be let so cheaply? And why have stood so long un-
tenanted?

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

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

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

You see, he does not believe I am sick!

And what can one do?

If a physician of high standing, and
one's own husband, assures friends and
relatives that there is really nothing
the matter with one but temporary
nervous depression, — a slight hysteri-
cal tendency, — what is one to do?

My brother is also a physician, and

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also of high standing, and he says the
same thing.

So I take phosphates or phosphites,
— whichever it is, — and tonics, and
journeys, and air, and exercise, and
am absolutely forbidden to "work"
until I am well again.

Personally I disagree with their ideas.

Personally I believe that congenial
work, with excitement and change,
would do me good.

But what is one to do?

I did write for a while in spite of
them; but it does exhaust me a good
deal — having to be so sly about it,
or else meet with heavy opposition.

I sometimes fancy that in my con-
dition if I had less opposition and more
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society and stimulus — but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition, and I confess it always makes me feel bad.
So I will let it alone and talk about the house.
The most beautiful place! It is quite alone, standing well back from the road, quite three miles from the village. It makes me think of English places that you read about, for there are hedges and walls and gates that lock, and lots of separate little houses for the gardeners and people.
There is a delicious garden! I never saw such a garden—large and shady, full of box-bordered paths, and lined with long grape-covered arbors with seats under them.

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There were greenhouses, too, but they are all broken now.
There was some legal trouble, I believe, something about the heirs and co-heirs; anyhow, the place has been empty for years.
That spoils my ghostliness, I am afraid; but I don't care — there is something strange about the house — I can feel it.
I even said so to John one moonlight evening, but he said what I felt was a draught, and shut the window.
I get unreasonably angry with John sometimes. I'm sure I never used to be so sensitive. I think it is due to this nervous condition.
But John says if I feel so I shall neglect proper self-control; so I take
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pains to control myself,— before him, at least,— and that makes me very tired.

I don't like our room a bit. I wanted one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window, and such pretty, old-fashioned chintz hangings! but John would not hear of it.

He said there was only one window and not room for two beds, and no near room for him if he took another.

He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction.

I have a schedule prescription for each hour in the day; he takes all care from me, and so I feel basely ungrateful not to value it more.

He said we came here solely on my

account, that I was to have perfect rest and all the air I could get. "Your exercise depends on your strength, my dear," said he, "and your food somewhat on your appetite; but air you can absorb all the time." So we took the nursery, at the top of the house.

It is a big, airy room, the whole floor nearly, with windows that look all ways, and air and sunshine galore. It was nursery first and then playground and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.

The paint and paper look as if a boys' school had used it. It is stripped off—the paper—in great patches all around the head of my bed, about as far
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as I can reach, and in a great place on the other side of the room low down. I never saw a worse paper in my life.

One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin.

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate, and provoke study, and when you follow the lame, uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions.

The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering, unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight.

It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.

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No wonder the children hated it! I should hate it myself if I had to live in this room long.

There comes John, and I must put this away,—he hates to have me write a word.
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We have been here two weeks, and I haven't felt like writing before, since that first day.

I am sitting by the window now, up in this atrocious nursery, and there is nothing to hinder my writing as much as I please, save lack of strength.

John is away all day, and even some nights when his cases are serious.

I am glad my case is not serious!

But these nervous troubles are dreadfully depressing.

John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no reason to suffer, and that satisfies him.

Of course it is only nervousness. It does weigh on me so not to do my duty in any way!

I meant to be such a help to John,
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was changed it would be the heavy bedstead, and then the barred windows, and then that gate at the head of the stairs, and so on.

"You know the place is doing you good," he said, "and really, dear, I don't care to renovate the house just for a three months' rental."

"Then do let us go downstairs," I said, "there are such pretty rooms there."

Then he took me in his arms and called me a blessed little goose, and said he would go down cellar if I wished, and have it whitewashed into the bargain.

But he is right enough about the beds and windows and things.

It is as airy and comfortable a room as any one need wish, and, of course, I would not be so silly as to make him uncomfortable just for a whim.

I'm really getting quite fond of the big room, all but that horrid paper.

Out of one window I can see the garden, those mysterious deep-shaded arbors, the riotous old-fashioned flowers, and bushes and gnarly trees.

Out of another I get a lovely view of the bay and a little private wharf belonging to the estate. There is a beautiful shaded lane that runs down there from the house. I always fancy I see people walking in these numerous paths and arbors, but John has cautioned me not to give way to fancy in the least. He says that with my imaginative power and habit of story-
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making a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manner of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency. So I try.

I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me.

But I find I get pretty tired when I try.

It is so discouraging not to have any advice and companionship about my work. When I get really well John says we will ask Cousin Henry and Julia down for a long visit; but he says he would as soon put fire-works in my pillow-case as to let me have those stimulating people about now.

I wish I could get well faster.

But I must not think about that. This paper looks to me as if it knew what a vicious influence it had!

There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside-down.

I got positively angry with the impertinence of it and the everlasting-ness. Up and down and sideways they crawl, and those absurd, unblinking eyes are everywhere. There is one place where two breadths didn't match, and the eyes go all up and down the line, one a little higher than the other.

I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have!
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I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store.

I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.

The furniture in this room is no worse than inharmonious, however, for we had to bring it all from downstairs. I suppose when this was used as a play-room they had to take the nursery things out, and no wonder! I never saw such ravages as the children have made here.

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The wall paper, as I said before, is torn off in spots, and it sticketh closer than a brother—they must have had perseverance as well as hatred.

Then the floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed, which is all we found in the room, looks as if it had been through the wars.

But I don't mind it a bit—only the paper.

There comes John's sister. Such a dear girl as she is, and so careful of me! I must not let her find me writing.

She is a perfect, an enthusiastic housekeeper, and hopes for no better profession. I verily believe she
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thinks it is the writing which made me sick!

But I can write when she is out, and see her a long way off from these windows.

There is one that commands the road, a lovely, shaded, winding road, and one that just looks off over the country. A lovely country, too, full of great elms and velvet meadows.

This wall paper has a kind of sub-pattern in a different shade, a particularly irritating one, for you can only see it in certain lights, and not clearly then.

But in the places where it isn’t faded, and where the sun is just so, I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.

There’s sister on the stairs!
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Well, the Fourth of July is over! The people are all gone and I am
tired out. John thought it might do me good to see a little company, so
we just had mother and Nellie and the children down for a week.

Of course I didn't do a thing. Jennie sees to everything now.
But it tired me all the same.

John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell
in the fall.

But I don't want to go there at all. I had a friend who was in his hands
once, and she says he is just like John and my brother, only more so!

Besides, it is such an undertaking to go so far.
I don't feel as if it was worth

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while to turn my hand over for anything, and I'm getting dreadfully fretful
and querulous.

I cry at nothing, and cry most of the time.

Of course I don't when John is here, or anybody else, but when I
am alone.

And I am alone a good deal just now. John is kept in town very often by
serious cases, and Jennie is good and lets me alone when I want her to.

So I walk a little in the garden or
down that lovely lane, sit on the
porch under the roses, and lie down
up here a good deal.

I'm getting really fond of the room
in spite of the wall paper. Perhaps
because of the wall paper.
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It dwells in my mind so!

I lie here on this great immovable bed — it is nailed down, I believe — and follow that pattern about by the hour. It is as good as gymnastics, I assure you. I start, we'll say, at the bottom, down in the corner over there where it has not been touched, and I determine for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion.

I know a little of the principles of design, and I know this thing was not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry, or anything else that I ever heard of. It is repeated, of course, by the breadths, but not otherwise.

Looked at in one way, each breadth stands alone, the bloated curves and flourishes — a kind of "debased Romanesque" with delirium tremens — go waddling up and down in isolated columns of fatuity.

But, on the other hand, they connect diagonally, and the sprawling outlines run off in great slanting waves of optic horror, like a lot of wallowing seaweeds in full chase.

The whole thing goes horizontally, too, at least it seems so, and I exhaust myself in trying to distinguish the order of its going in that direction.

They have used a horizontal breadth for a frieze, and that adds wonderfully to the confusion.

There is one end of the room where it is almost intact, and there, when
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the cross-lights fade and the low sun shines directly upon it, I can almost fancy radiation, after all,—the interminable grotesques seem to form around a common centre and rush off in headlong plunges of equal distraction.

It makes me tired to follow it. I will take a nap, I guess.

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I don't know why I should write this.

I don't want to.

I don't feel able.

And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I feel and think in some way—it is such a relief!

But the effort is getting to be greater than the relief.

Half the time now I am awfully lazy, and lie down ever so much.

John says I mustn't lose my strength, and has me take cod-liver oil and lots of tonics and things, to say nothing of ale and wine and rare meat.

Dear John! He loves me very dearly, and hates to have me sick. I tried to have a real earnest reasonable
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take care of myself for his sake, and keep well.

He says no one but myself can help me out of it, that I must use my will and self-control and not let my silly fancies run away with me.

There's one comfort, the baby is well and happy, and does not have to occupy this nursery with the horrid wall paper.

If we had not used it that blessed child would have! What a fortunate escape! Why, I wouldn't have a child of mine, an impressionable little thing, live in such a room for worlds.

I never thought of it before, but it is lucky that John kept me here, after all. I can stand it so much easier than a baby, you see.

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talk with him the other day, and tell him how I wished he would let me go and make a visit to Cousin Henry and Julia.

But he said I wasn't able to go, nor able to stand it after I got there; and I did not make out a very good case for myself, for I was crying before I had finished.

It is getting to be a great effort for me to think straight. Just this nervous weakness, I suppose.

And dear John gathered me up in his arms, and just carried me upstairs and laid me on the bed, and sat by me and read to me till he tired my head.

He said I was his darling and his comfort and all he had, and that I must
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Of course I never mention it to them any more, — I am too wise, — but I keep watch of it all the same.

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.

Behind that outside pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day.

It is always the same shape, only very numerous.

And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern. I don't like it a bit. I wonder — I begin to think — I wish John would take me away from here!

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It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so.

But I tried it last night.

It was moonlight. The moon shines in all around, just as the sun does.

I hate to see it sometimes, it creeps so slowly, and always comes in by one window or another.

John was asleep and I hated to waken him, so I kept still and watched the moonlight on that undulating wall paper till I felt creepy.

The faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out.

I got up softly and went to feel and see if the paper did move, and when I came back John was awake.
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"What is it, little girl?" he said. "Don't go walking about like that—you'll get cold."

I thought it was a good time to talk, so I told him that I really was not gaining here, and that I wished he would take me away.

"Why, darling!" said he, "our lease will be up in three weeks, and I can't see how to leave before.

"The repairs are not done at home, and I cannot possibly leave town just now. Of course if you were in any danger I could and would, but you really are better, dear, whether you can see it or not. I am a doctor, dear, and I know. You are gaining flesh and color, your appetite is better. I feel really much easier about you."

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"I don't weigh a bit more," said I, "nor as much; and my appetite may be better in the evening, when you are here, but it is worse in the morning, when you are away."

"Bless her little heart!" said he with a big hug; "she shall be as sick as she pleases. But now let's improve the shining hours by going to sleep, and talk about it in the morning."

"And you won't go away?" I asked gloomily.

"Why, how can I, dear? It is only three weeks more and then we will take a nice little trip of a few days while Jennie is getting the house ready. Really, dear, you are better!"

"Better in body, perhaps"—I began, and stopped short, for he sat up
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straight and looked at me with such a stern, reproachful look that I could not say another word.

"My darling," said he, "I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind! There is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like yours. It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you so?"

So of course I said no more on that score, and we went to sleep before long. He thought I was asleep first, but I wasn't, — I lay there for hours trying to decide whether that front pattern and the back pattern really did move together or separately.

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On a pattern like this, by daylight, there is a lack of sequence, a defiance of law, that is a constant irritant to a normal mind.

The color is hideous enough, and unreliable enough, and infuriating enough, but the pattern is torturing.

You think you have mastered it, but just as you get well under way in following, it turns a back somersault, and there you are. It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you. It is like a bad dream.

The outside pattern is a florid arabesque, reminding one of a fungus. If you can imagine a toadstool in joints, an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions, — why, that is something like it.

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That is, sometimes!

There is one marked peculiarity about this paper, a thing nobody seems to notice but myself, and that is that it changes as the light changes.

When the sun shoots in through the east window — I always watch for that first long, straight ray — it changes so quickly that I never can quite believe it.

That is why I watch it always.

By moonlight — the moon shines in all night when there is a moon — I wouldn't know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern, I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

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I didn’t realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, — that dim sub-pattern, — but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour.

I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can.

Indeed, he started the habit by making me lie down for an hour after each meal.

It is a very bad habit, I am convinced, for, you see, I don’t sleep.

And that cultivates deceit, for I don’t tell them I’m awake, — oh, no!

The fact is, I am getting a little afraid of John.

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He seems very queer sometimes, and even Jennie has an inexplicable look.

It strikes me occasionally, just as a scientific hypothesis, that perhaps it is the paper!

I have watched John when he did not know I was looking, and come into the room suddenly on the most innocent excuses, and I've caught him several times looking at the paper! And Jennie too. I caught Jennie with her hand on it once.

She didn't know I was in the room, and when I asked her in a quiet, a very quiet voice, with the most restrained manner possible, what she was doing with the paper she turned around as if she had been caught stealing, and

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looked quite angry—asked me why I should frighten her so!

Then she said that the paper stained everything it touched, that she had found yellow smooches on all my clothes and John's, and she wished we would be more careful!

Did not that sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!
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Life is very much more exciting now than it used to be. You see I have something more to expect, to look forward to, to watch. I really do eat better, and am more quiet than I was.

John is so pleased to see me improve! He laughed a little the other day, and said I seemed to be flourishing in spite of my wall paper.

I turned it off with a laugh. I had no intention of telling him it was because of the wall paper — he would make fun of me. He might even want to take me away.

I don’t want to leave now until I have found it out. There is a week more, and I think that will be enough.

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I’m feeling ever so much better! I don’t sleep much at night, for it is so interesting to watch developments; but I sleep a good deal in the daytime.

In the daytime it is tiresome and perplexing.

There are always new shoots on the fungus, and new shades of yellow all over it. I cannot keep count of them, though I have tried conscientiously.

It is the strangest yellow, that wallpaper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw — not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things.

But there is something else about that paper — the smell! I noticed it the moment we came into the room, but with so much air and sun it was
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not bad. Now we have had a week of
fog and rain, and whether the windows
are open or not the smell is here.
It creeps all over the house.
I find it hovering in the dining-room,
skulking in the parlor, hiding in the
hall, lying in wait for me on the
stairs.
It gets into my hair.
Even when I go to ride, if I turn
my head suddenly and surprise it—
there is that smell!
Such a peculiar odor, too! I have
spent hours in trying to analyze it, to
find what it smelled like.
It is not bad—at first, and very
gentle, but quite the subtlest, most en-
during odor I ever met.
In this damp weather it is awful. I

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wake up in the night and find it hang-
ing over me.
It used to disturb me at first. I
thought seriously of burning the house
—to reach the smell.
But now I am used to it. The only
thing I can think of that it is like is the
color of the paper—a yellow smell!
There is a very funny mark on this
wall, low down, near the mopboard. A
streak that runs around the room. It
goes behind every piece of furniture,
except the bed, a long, straight, even
smooch, as if it had been rubbed over
and over.
I wonder how it was done and who
did it, and what they did it for. Round
and round and round—round and
round and round—it makes me dizzy!
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I really have discovered something at last.

Through watching so much at night, when it changes so, I have finally found out.

The front pattern does move — and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!

Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.

Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.

And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern — it strangles so!
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I think that woman gets out in the daytime!

And I'll tell you why — privately — I've seen her!

I can see her out of every one of my windows!

It is the same woman, I know, for she is always creeping, and most women do not creep by daylight.

I see her in that long shaded lane, creeping up and down. I see her in those dark grape arbors, creeping all around the garden.

I see her on that long road under the trees, creeping along, and when a carriage comes she hides under the blackberry vines.

I don't blame her a bit. It must be very humiliating to be caught creeping by daylight!

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I always lock the door when I creep by daylight. I can't do it at night, for I know John would suspect something at once.

And John is so queer, now, that I don't want to irritate him. I wish he would take another room! Besides, I don't want anybody to get that woman out at night but myself.

I often wonder if I could see her out of all the windows at once.

But, turn as fast as I can, I can only see out of one at one time.

And though I always see her she may be able to creep faster than I can turn!

I have watched her sometimes away off in the open country, creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind.
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If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little.
I have found out another funny thing, but I shan't tell it this time! It does not do to trust people too much.

There are only two more days to get this paper off, and I believe John is beginning to notice. I don't like the look in his eyes.

And I heard him ask Jennie a lot of professional questions about me. She had a very good report to give.

She said I slept a good deal in the daytime.

John knows I don't sleep very well at night, for all I'm so quiet!

He asked me all sorts of questions,

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too, and pretended to be very loving and kind.
As if I couldn't see through him!
Still, I don't wonder he acts so, sleeping under this paper for three months.

It only interests me, but I feel sure John and Jennie are secretly affected by it.
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Hurrah! This is the last day, but it is enough. John is to stay in town over night, and won't be out until this evening.

Jennie wanted to sleep with me—the sly thing! but I told her I should undoubtedly rest better for a night all alone.

That was clever, for really I wasn't alone a bit! As soon as it was moonlight, and that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.

I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.

A strip about as high as my head and half around the room.

And then when the sun came and

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that awful pattern began to laugh at me I declared I would finish it today!

We go away to-morrow, and they are moving all my furniture down again to leave things as they were before.

Jennie looked at the wall in amazement, but I told her merrily that I did it out of pure spite at the vicious thing.

She laughed and said she wouldn't mind doing it herself, but I must not get tired.

How she betrayed herself that time!

But I am here, and no person touches this paper but me—not alive!

She tried to get me out of the room—it was too patent! But I said it was so quiet and empty and clean now that
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I believed I would lie down again and sleep all I could; and not to wake me even for dinner—I would call when I woke.

So now she is gone, and the servants are gone, and the things are gone, and there is nothing left but that great bedstead nailed down, with the canvas mattress we found on it.

We shall sleep downstairs to-night, and take the boat home to-morrow.

I quite enjoy the room, now it is bare again.

How those children did tear about here!

This bedstead is fairly gnawed!

But I must get to work.

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path.

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I don't want to go out, and I don't want to have anybody come in, till John comes.

I want to astonish him.

I've got a rope up here that even Jennie did not find. If that woman does get out, and tries to get away, I can tie her!

But I forgot I could not reach far without anything to stand on!

This bed will not move!

I tried to lift and push it until I was lame, and then I got so angry I bit off a little piece at one corner—but it hurt my teeth.

Then I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads
and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus
growths just shriek with derision!

I am getting angry enough to do some-
thing desperate. To jump out of the
window would be admirable exercise,
but the bars are too strong even to try.

Besides, I wouldn’t do it. Of course
not. I know well enough that a step
like that is improper and might be mis-
construed.

I don’t like to look out of the win-
dows even—there are so many of those
creeping women, and they creep so
fast.

I wonder if they all come out of that
wall paper, as I did?
. But I am securely fastened now by
my well-hidden rope—you don’t get
me out in the road there!

I suppose I shall have to get back
behind the pattern when it comes night,
and that is hard!

It is so pleasant to be out in this
great room and creep around as I
please!

I don’t want to go outside. I won’t,
even if Jennie asks me to.

For outside you have to creep on the
ground, and everything is green instead
of yellow.

But here I can creep smoothly on the
floor, and my shoulder just fits in that
long smooch around the wall, so I can-
not lose my way.

Why, there’s John at the door!
It is no use, young man, you can’t
open it!

How he does call and pound!
THE YELLOW WALL PAPER

Now he's crying for an axe.
It would be a shame to break down
that beautiful door!

"John, dear!" said I in the gentlest
voice, "the key is down by the front
steps, under a plantain leaf!"

That silenced him for a few mo-
ments.

Then he said — very quietly indeed,
"Open the door, my darling!"

"I can't," said I. "The key is down
by the front door, under a plantain
leaf!"

And then I said it again, several
times, very gently and slowly, and said
it so often that he had to go and see,
and he got it, of course, and came in.
He stopped short by the door.

"What is the matter?" he cried.
Mason yearned for inspiration and vigor. “How to live in this stupid world is a problem. I tire of inanities and take refuge in the clouds only to be pulled down again by a machine that declines to serve.”

Like thousands of other Americans at the time, Mason suffered from neurasthenia. Michigan alienist E. H. Van Deusen published the first account of the illness in April 1869, but it was New York neurologist George Beard who reached a wide audience with his article a few months later, and whose name has since become synonymous with neurasthenia. The diagnosis rapidly spread through society as physicians applied it to men and women of all ages and classes, so that by the turn of the twentieth century it was one of the most common medical conditions afflicting Americans.

The diagnosis reportedly occurred when people depleted their “nervous energy,” a vital force thought to be produced by digestion and distributed throughout the body via the nervous system. This energy allowed people to think rationally, to remain active, and to stay healthy. Neurasthenia’s symptoms varied and included insomnia, depression, fatigue, indigestion, muscle pain, headaches, an inability to concentrate, and general anxiety. Reflecting the lack of standardization in nineteenth-century medicine, the illness had many names, among them “nervous prostration,” “nervous fatigue,” and “nervous exhaustion.” Today, physicians commonly compare the diagnosis and its collection of symptoms to a range of disorders including chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, clinical depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and postpartum depression.

I thrive on idleness but succumb straightaway to any effort whatever,” Amelia Gere Mason admitted in 1897 to her friend and physician, S. Weir Mitchell. Frustrated by a weak body and a modern world built of skyscrapers and business rather than sentiment and imagination, the sixty-six-year-old

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Summary: This article examines how the affliction of neurasthenia, commonly diagnosed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, acted as a catalyst for intellectual and lifestyle changes during a time of modernization. At the center of the study are three individuals: neurologist S. Weir Mitchell (1829–1914) and two of his patients, critic and historian Amelia Gere Mason (1831–1923) and writer and homemaker Sarah Butler Wister (1835–1908). Using archived correspondence between Mitchell and his patients, this article seeks to reveal how each woman tailored her treatment to fit her personal sensibilities; to reassess Mitchell’s notorious reputation as a misogynist (gained largely from his 1887 treatment of Charlotte Perkins Gilman); and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the doctor-patient relationship in neurasthenia cases.

Keywords: history, medicine, culture, gender, doctor-patient relationship, S. Weir Mitchell, Amelia Gere Mason, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Butler Wister
Unlike tuberculosis, which consumed the lungs, neurasthenia lacked an obvious cause and clear pathology. This prompted a number of people at the time to question the validity of the diagnosis and to doubt that neurasthenics suffered from anything more serious than a “fashionable” desire to be sick. Others believed that the diagnosis was too broad and needed to be parsed in favor of more specific and rigorous diagnoses. Those physicians who were untroubled by neurasthenia’s ambiguity created lists of potential health hazards, such as living busy lives, engaging in prolonged mental activity, and failing to eat, sleep, or exercise properly. Doctors also blamed environmental factors, including North America’s climatic extremes, the constant hustle and bustle of urban life, and the lack of fresh air and fortifying nature in the nation’s burgeoning cities. I do not attempt here to address the diagnostic validity of neurasthenia, nor to assess what neurasthenics “really” suffered from. Instead, I approach neurasthenics as the historian of science Georges Canguilhem suggested patients be approached: by allowing the sick to define themselves.

Neurasthenia faded as a medical diagnosis in the United States by the 1930s, but it arose again as a subject for academic investigation in the 1970s as scholars across the humanities revived discussion of the condition. Some in women’s history argued that neurasthenia represented a clear pathology. This prompted a number of others to see the disease as an opportunity for women to bargain with patriarchy, or, more recently, as an outright source of patient agency.

Those physicians who were untroubled by neurasthenia’s ambiguity created lists of potential health hazards, such as living busy lives, engaging in prolonged mental activity, and failing to eat, sleep, or exercise properly. Doctors also blamed environmental factors, including North America’s climatic extremes, the constant hustle and bustle of urban life, and the lack of fresh air and fortifying nature in the nation’s burgeoning cities. I do not attempt here to address the diagnostic validity of neurasthenia, nor to assess what neurasthenics “really” suffered from. Instead, I approach neurasthenics as the historian of science Georges Canguilhem suggested patients be approached: by allowing the sick to define themselves.

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6. Love, “Neurasthenia” (n. 4). O. Henry’s short story on neurasthenia is also a good illustration of people’s growing belief that the condition was nothing more than an absurd celebration of invalidism: O. Henry, Adventures in Neurasthenia: Let Me Feel Your Pulse (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1910).


their world. For those concerned with culture, neurasthenia represented a method of coping with widespread changes in the economy, society, and gender roles. The latest book on neurasthenia, Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter’s edited volume CULTURES OF NEURASTHENIA FROM BEARD TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR (2001), points toward promising new directions of neurasthenia research, including comparative studies between nations that incorporate discussions of consumerism, doctor-patient relationships, medical professionalization, health paradigms, and the roles of class and gender. Regardless of disciplinary approach, many of the studies done on neurasthenia over the past thirty years have been influenced by provocative work on the constructed nature of illness and normality by authors such as Thomas Szasz, David Rothman, Michel Foucault, and Susan Sontag. Consequently, questions of who had authority over the diagnosis and what was neurasthenia’s social influence have fueled some of the most fascinating discussions on the disease.

This paper follows the tradition of Tom Lutz, Regina Morantz-Sanchez, Barbara Sicherman, Nancy Theriot, and those who have explored patient influence within the late nineteenth-century doctor-patient relationship. At the center of my discussion are Dr. Weir Mitchell (1829–1914) and two of his neurasthenic patients: critic and intellectual historian Amelia Gere Mason (1831–1923), and essayist and homemaker Sarah Butler Wister (1835–1908). Using archived correspondence from the College of Physicians of Philadelphia and period works in medicine and literature, I examine how Mason and Wister developed an understanding of their condition that accepted, rejected, and sometimes went beyond their physician’s advice. Although Mitchell’s relationships with Mason and Wister may not be typical of all relationships between physicians and neurasthenic patients, the letter-to-letter interaction of their correspondences provides a dynamic picture that helps to flesh out previous studies that have sought to identify the patient’s role using patient records and medical articles. The trusting relationships that emerge between the women and Mitchell help to put into perspective Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s notorious encounter with Mitchell and allow for a more nuanced understanding of the doctor’s treatment of his female patients. By no means exclusively a diagnosis constructed by physicians and foisted upon patients, neurasthenia allowed the afflicted to personalize the meaning of their suffering and enact what Lutz has called “significant life changes.” Mason and Wister, working in conjunction with their physician, used their neurasthenia as a lens for critically assessing a modernizing America; it let them hone personal beliefs, engage in new leisurely lifestyles, and question gendered labor and family roles.


18. Recent works that have relied on patient records include Theriot, “Women’s Voices” (n. 11); Hilary Marland, “‘Uterine Mischief’: W. S. Playfair and His Neurasthenic Patients,” in Gijswijt-Hofstra and Porter, eds., Cultures of Neurasthenia (n. 10), pp. 117–39; Joachim Radkau, “The Neurasthenic Experience in Imperial Germany: Expeditions into Patient Records and Side-looks upon General History,” ibid., pp. 199–217. Lutz relied on articles written by physicians to get at the evolving place of the doctor-patient relationship within neurasthenia’s multifaceted history; see Tom Lutz, Varieties of Medical Experience: Doctors and Patients, Psyche and Soma in America,” ibid., pp. 51–79.

Dr. Mitchell

Weir Mitchell was one of America’s most influential shapers of neurasthenia during the late nineteenth century. Born a doctor’s son in 1829, he followed the family profession after earning his two-year medical degree in neurology from Jefferson College in Philadelphia. Typical of his day, he spent an internship in Europe with the added advantage of studying under the renowned French physiologist Claude Bernard. He worked for the Union Army as a contracted doctor during the Civil War and co-authored a seminal book on the treatment of gunshot wounds, which helped to establish him as America’s premier nerve specialist. After the war, Mitchell spun his reputation as a neurologist into a lucrative career treating the nervous disorders of America’s elite. By the time of his death in 1914, fellow physicians hailed him as the most accomplished neurologist of his day.

Yet Mitchell’s career was hardly typical of the narrow specialization that would characterize medicine in the twentieth century. He was also a novelist and poet of moderate success, a regional celebrity, a sought-after public lecturer, a philanthropist, a University of Pennsylvania trustee, and the president of numerous medical organizations—all occupations that kept him in the public limelight and at the head of the medical community for fifty years. Written with a novelist’s flair, Mitchell’s books, articles, and lectures on neurasthenia exerted a powerful influence on popular and professional understanding of the illness. They depicted the disease much as Beard’s work had done, as a distinctly modern condition that occurred as Americans began to shed their traditional lifestyles. Families left spacious countrysides for burgeoning cities; men left the plow and field for the office and business; women left parlor and family and the professional reputations they cultivated as a result, see John Harley Warner, Against the Spirit of System: The French Impulse in Nineteenth-Century American Medicine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).


24. S. Weir Mitchell, Fat and Blood and How to Make Them (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1878). It should be noted that men were occasionally prescribed the rest cure, even though it has developed a reputation as a women’s cure.

25. One of the most vocal opponents to women’s full participation in academic life was Dr. Edward Clarke, a professor of medicine at Harvard, whose ironically titled book Sex in Education, or, A Fair Chance for Girls (Boston: Osgood, 1875) was at the center of late nineteenth-century debate over women’s education. For a good overview of the scientific community’s belief in sexual difference during the nineteenth century, see Cynthia Eagle Russett, Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).


27. Ibid., pp. 139–46.

28. Morantz also recognized Mitchell’s respect for “educated, intelligent, strong-minded women” in her essay “The Lady and Her Physician” (n. 11), p. 42. In addition to Mitchell’s their mental strength. For those who fell victim to these modern lifestyles and became neurasthenic, Mitchell often prescribed his hallmark “rest cure,” consisting of six to eight weeks of complete bed rest, a diet of fattening foods, and frequent massages to prevent muscle atrophy. The cure was designed to replenish the body’s supply of “fat and blood” thought necessary to generate vital biological energy.

Mitchell wove conservative patriarchal beliefs about women’s roles into his literature on neurasthenia. He argued that young women should refrain from thinking too deeply, stay out of professional careers, and put off college or avoid it altogether lest they risk depleting their nervous energy. These prescriptions sprang from a belief, shared with others in the nineteenth-century scientific community, that there were fundamental, biological differences between men and women. In his popular health book Doctor and Patient (1888), Mitchell claimed that men and women had different intelligences, “both quantitative and in a measure qualitative,” that education could never change; women would never be “equal” to men. If women competed with men, his argument went, they not only risked overexertion and sickness but they also risked spoiling their feminine virtue—their “true attractiveness”—thereby making themselves less fit to be man’s “friendly lover.” For Mitchell, women best served society as supportive wives and healthy mothers, roles that were threatened when they competed with men academically or professionally.

Yet despite his seemingly patronizing attitude toward them, Mitchell was a complicated man who had a reputation for respecting and enjoying the company of intelligent women. Most of his patients were women.


who specifically sought him for treatment. Among these was Amelia Gere
Mason, a neurasthenic who enjoyed Mitchell’s friendship and relied on
his medical assistance but believed that the doctor’s patriarchal beliefs
were misguided. Neurasthenia did not discourage her from engaging in
intellectual activity; rather, Mason’s struggle with the illness encouraged
her to become a published critic of modern American culture and an
advocate for an expanded public role for American women.

Amelia Gere Mason

Born Amelia Ruth Gere in 1831 in Northampton, Massachusetts, as a girl
Mason moved west with her family to Chicago, a city that remained her
more-or-less permanent home until her death in 1923. After earning her
degree in music from Mount Holyoke College in 1851, she served as
principal of a private school and taught classics until neurasthenia struck
and her health failed, causing her to withdraw from school teaching and
administration. Mason’s neurasthenia came and went in cycles, allowing
her to teach piano and write while she was healthy, but forcing her into
seclusion—often outside the city—when she was ill. Marriage does not
seem to have been a high priority, for she waited until she was forty-one
before wedding businessman Alverin Armington Mason in 1872. They
had no children.

Mason took advantage of the culture that Chicago offered to a woman
of comfortable means. She visited exhibits as they passed through and
kept abreast of the art world by reading the cutting-edge journal The New
Path and the more mainstream Fortnightly Review. She found herself part
of a community of culturally minded women that revolved around Kate

31. Muriel Beadle, The Fortnightly of Chicago, the City and Its Women: 1873–1973 (Chicago:
32. Mason, Memories of a Friend (n. 29), pp. 41–42.
33. Who Was Who in America (n. 29), p. 785; Amelia Gere Mason, The Women of the French
Salons (New York: Century, 1891).
35. William Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: Norton,

Newell Doggett, an avid botanist, skilled dancer, and vice-president of the
National Woman Suffrage Association. These women voraciously de-
voured Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, and Hawthorne, considered
Emerson their “sage and philosopher,” religiously read the Nation, and
valued James Russell Lowell and the Atlantic group as a “national trea-
sure.” By the late 1860s Mason and her friends carried on, as she later
recalled, an “indefatigable search for everything that could throw a ray of
light on what was going on in the world of art and intellect.”

Inspired by Matthew Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy (1869) and John
Stuart Mill’s The Subjection of Women (1869), by 1873 Doggett’s circle had
evolved into the Fortnightly, a formal club that met in the tradition of the
French salons and dedicated itself to the intellectual and cultural devel-
oment of women. The similarity between the Fortnightly and French
salons was no coincidence: Chicago was then home to the glamorous
Madame d’Héricourt, a former salon hostess in exile from France who
frequently gave lectures on literature, society, politics, and philosophy.
The legacy of European salons, especially women’s role in them, left an
indelible impression on Mason, who later spent seven years in Europe
researching the history of the French salon tradition and published the
well-received (and still widely available) work of intellectual history The
Women of the French Salons (1891).

For Mason, modern Chicago was a gendered city. As its men increas-
ingly placed economic profits over social responsibility, women had to
assume the duty of sustaining civic culture. She saw the most talented
men engaged in a “race for money” after the Civil War, always thinking of
the “utilitarian side of life” and unwilling to dedicate their talent to the
arts. Indeed, business was the topic of the day in Chicago as the city
grew at an astounding rate, generating economic activity that only accel-
errated with the rush to rebuild after the Great Fire of 1871. The popula-
tion more than doubled during the Civil War decade, to 350,000 inhabit-
ants—which was still widely available) work of intellectual history The
Women of the French Salons (1891).
believed that her city desperately needed the moral, stabilizing influence of artistic and literary culture, and with local men dedicating themselves to business, “this work was clearly to fall upon women,” she claimed, “if done at all.”

Although Mason was an active, confident, and ambitious woman, neurasthenia sporadically left her lethargic, insecure, and depressed. A particularly devastating bout with the illness in 1882 caused her to “let go” the “threads of care” and convinced her that her life “had ended.” Despondent, she traveled to Philadelphia and sought Mitchell’s help for the first time. Details of their initial meeting are scant, but one thing is certain: Mason gave Mitchell credit for restoring “value” to her life. What ensued was a thirty-two-year relationship between patient and doctor recorded in nearly two hundred letters. Because the two lived in different cities (Mason in Chicago, Mitchell in Philadelphia), they met only a few times for consultation; letters filled the therapeutic void, and today they give us insight into the nature of Mason’s illness and the method of Mitchell’s treatment. Over the years their roles of patient and physician became less distinct, especially once Mason began writing her histories and essays and Mitchell his novels and poetry. By Mitchell’s death in 1914, their friendship seems to have become therapeutic in itself as each relied on the other for emotional support and engaging conversation.

“Intellectual enthusiasms are wearing,” Mason complained to Mitchell; “thinking too severely exhausts me.” She had explosions of activity in which she penned essays (on literature, music, and society), published books (including *Women of the French Salons* in 1891 and *Women in the Golden Ages* in 1901), presented papers at society meetings, read the latest novels, and kept up with friends. But inevitably her motivation would collapse under a demanding schedule: “I wish to do twenty things at once, hence, I am idle.” With her energy exhausted, her thoughts veered toward despondency, especially during the holiday season when her life lacked inspiration, joy, and hope. “I stay here,” she somberly wrote during a Chicago winter, “because it is a very good place to die in.

There is so little that is interesting to leave.” The need to nurse her sick husband, who suffered from vertigo and crippling falls to the ground, also weighed heavily on her mind. “Everything falls on my weak shoulders,” she lamented; “I give out but get up and stumble on...the Sword of Damocles hangs always over my head.” Following her husband’s death in 1904, Mason felt even greater loneliness and isolation. “The flowers and souvenirs scattered about my room tell me that I am not forgotten,” she remarked to Mitchell a few days after Christmas in 1912, “but I feel on the outside of things and it is chilly.”

To regain control over her mind and to combat neurasthenia’s demoralizing grip, Mason threw herself into the role of critic. “One must do something to avoid thought when one is alone and no longer young,” Mason, in her seventies, explained; “but I don’t care for the surface of life—and its depths I am afraid of.” It was to this area between the “surface” of life and its “depths” that she turned her attention in 1907. In a diversionary exercise, she wrote an “exact picture” of her life, as a stranger might see it, from childhood to the time she left college. “It is curious to trace the growth of a soul,” she said of her “psychological” work. Although she shied away from finishing this introspective self-examination, the perspective she took—third-person—is telling, for it reveals a woman who understood the need for emotional distance. By assuming the point of view of a third person and writing about “a soul” rather than “my soul,” Mason established a critic’s cushion of objectivity that allowed her to gaze upon her life without succumbing to neurasthenia’s morbid, depressing thoughts. Acting as a critic was therapeutic for her, and she often turned her rational mind toward assessing the world around her.

Not surprisingly, Mason critically evaluated Mitchell’s medical care, which she described as “autocratic,” yet effective. A key element in his success as a physician, she suggested, was an “impersonal” demeanor that made him the perfect person with whom women could share their problems and secrets. Comparing Mitchell’s office to a confessional, she

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37. Mason to Mitchell, 17 February 1912, MP-CPP.

38. Ibid.

39. These letters are currently held in MP-CPP, series 4.3, box 9.

40. Mason to Mitchell, 25 April 1907, MP-CPP.

41. Mason to Mitchell, 17 March 1892, MP-CPP.
claimed: “A woman confides to a trusted physician what she could say to no other friend.”\textsuperscript{48} For Mason, the doctor-patient relationship was a source for emotional comfort that appears to have partially supplanted what historian Nancy Cott described as the “bonds of womanhood” of the early nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{49} Mason had “faith” in the ability of physicians such as Mitchell—rather than other women—to provide comfort in times of woe. “What are physicians for? To serve as a receptacle for human sorrows?” she asked Mitchell; “Many die, as you know, for the lack of someone to persuade them to live.”\textsuperscript{50}

Although Mason trusted Mitchell’s medical opinion, she displayed remarkable candor in criticizing his patriarchal assumptions. Taking exception to his characterization of the submissive Olivia, the heroine in his novel \textit{Roland Blake} (1886), Mason suggested that his “autocratic position” with patients had caused him to overestimate women’s “humility under masculine despotism.” Women, she explained, loved strength but never loved being “made to yield.”\textsuperscript{51} Choice, rather than duty, should be the basis for women’s decisions; to think otherwise, she insisted, was a “popular fallacy” that she believed the “coming woman” of the late nineteenth century would dispel.\textsuperscript{52} During another exchange in which Mitchell claimed that female physicians lacked “poetic femininity,” Mason sharply reprimanded her doctor:

Why should a woman with a capacity for certain things quite legitimate and honorable, spend her life in poverty and distasteful toil because men think the things she likes and can do, unpatriotic, or rather why do men think the practical embodiment of the ministering angel unpatriotic? Is it less patriotic to prescribe for the sick than to nurse them, or to make bread, or to sew?\textsuperscript{53}

Mason’s experience participating in Doggett’s salon clearly left her confident of women’s intellectual and social abilities. Despite her own preference for dispassionate physicians, she recognized a place in medicine for women’s sympathetic (“poetic”) character, a conviction that Regina Morantz-Sanchez has argued was shared by those who were determined to open the profession of medicine to women.\textsuperscript{54} Also, by linking the professional limits women faced with the “poverty and distasteful toil” in which they too often found themselves, Mason recognized how women were challenged by a combination of factors, including economics, ostracism, and patriarchy. “I don’t like all of the changes in attitude of women,” she wrote to Mitchell in 1912, “but I like less the old attitude towards them, which stamped them with inferiority in spite of a pretense of chivalry.”\textsuperscript{55}

Rejecting out of hand the patriarchal subtext that Mitchell attempted to write into neurasthenia, Mason nevertheless agreed in principle to the doctor’s suspicion of modernity. Mitchell’s warning that America’s pursuit of the “dollar devil” robbed the nation of its vital energy must have made intuitive sense to Mason, who blamed what she saw as a tragic decline of culture in Chicago on the post–Civil War drive for profit.\textsuperscript{56}

Both Mitchell and Mason saw a capitalist society out of touch with what was important, be it the vital need for rest or the equally pressing need for culture. Mason’s critique of modern America went beyond her indictment of capitalism to include the “radical democracy” of Jane Addams, the “colorless” realism in literature, and the “uninspiring” skyscrapers in her hometown of Chicago.\textsuperscript{57} For Mason, it was nearly impossible to spend time on intellectual and cultural matters without seeing herself as an activist of sorts—not a radical or progressive activist, but rather what historian Jackson Lears might call an “antimodernist” who believed that morality and social stability could be found in philosophy, literature, music, art, and a healthy respect for intelligent, talented women.\textsuperscript{58}

Mason’s relationship with Mitchell reveals subtleties in the doctor’s personality and therapeutic approach typically overlooked by scholars who otherwise focus on the neurologist’s trademark rest cure. Mitchell reserved his rest cure for only the most severe cases, for patients in neurasthenic tailspins who were incapable of caring for themselves. In these situations, he believed, physicians needed to create a highly structured environment in which every aspect of the patient’s life—including eating, drinking, and movement (bed pans were provided)—was regulated for at least a month. The rest cure operated on two levels: First, it ensured that neurasthenics ate properly so that they gained weight—“fat and blood,” in Mitchell’s words—which presumably promoted higher

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Mason to Mitchell, 27 December 1886, MP-CPP.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Mason to Mitchell, 10 February 1911, MP-CPP.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Mason to Mitchell, 7 July 1892, MP-CPP.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Mason to Mitchell, 9 January 1912, MP-CPP (emphasis in the original).
\item \textsuperscript{54} Regina Markell Morantz-Sanchez, \textit{Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
\item \textsuperscript{55} Mitchell, \textit{Wear and Tear} (n. 29), pp. 8–9; Mason, Memories of a Friend (n. 29), pp. 14–15.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Mason to Mitchell, 2 January 1911, 1 August 1912, 14 October 1912, MP-CPP.
\item \textsuperscript{57} Lears outlines antimodernism in \textit{No Place of Grace} (n. 14).
\end{enumerate}
levels of nervous energy. Second, the rest cure’s controlled environment allowed physicians to put patients through a psychological boot camp in order to strengthen neurasthenic minds otherwise weakened by sickness. According to Mitchell, this required “a firm and steady will” on the part of the physician (an “autocratic position,” as Mason saw it) so that he could “insure belief in his opinions and obedience to his decrees.” The goal was to discourage patients from dwelling on morbid thoughts or wallowing in self-pity, and to encourage an active, positive attitude (something that the contemporary Harvard neurologist James Jackson Putnam compared to using the power of suggestion).

To this end, Mitchell suggested that people who found themselves sinking into a neurasthenic funk should engage in intellectual and creative activity. Using the example of a neurasthenic he had known for years, he argued that her “safeguard from utter wreck” was a “clear and resolute faith,” and “a profound and unfailing interest in men and things and books.” This, he claimed, “gave strange vigor to her whole range of intellectual activities.” The goal, according to Mitchell, was for neurasthenics to strengthen and occupy their minds so that they would not succumb to sorrow, pain, and despair. Training the brain to sharpen its focus and operate rationally was, in his opinion, one of the best things a woman could do. So long as they stayed away from depressing topics, he encouraged women to read, sketch nature, paint, learn photography, keep a diary, and write poetry as constructive ways to control their minds and strengthen their wills. If these activities piqued women’s curiosity and desire to learn more about the world, Mitchell believed this was “so much the better.”

The key element of Mitchell’s therapeutic strategy is that it was, to a degree, escapist and designed to distract people from the depressing, morbid thoughts and lassitude of neurasthenia. He did not seem to expect or anticipate that his patients would use their creative and intellectual activities to challenge the separate gender roles that he believed were natural and healthy. Illustrative of his therapeutic strategy was Olivia, the heroine of his novel Roland Blake (and the same character Mason found too submissive), who took up sketching the ocean at Cape May as a way of escaping the neurasthenic influences of her troublesome cousin and a complicated love affair. Sketched did little directly to solve Olivia’s problems, but the activity allowed her to gather her thoughts and rejuvenate emotionally in the face of an impending romantic crisis.

Mitchell employed this therapeutic strategy of keeping neurasthenics preoccupied with something other than their illness in his correspondence with Mason. A recovering neurasthenic himself, Mitchell revealed to Mason that he relied on writing to keep from “dwelling upon [the] intolerable calamity” of his daughter’s death. He regularly encouraged Mason to think and write critically, especially on novels and poetry, his own work included. This she did. Sometimes she wrote to vent frustrations, as when she complained about Nietzsche (“Do you read that man who is coloring all the new thoughts? I detest him!”). Other times she posed philosophical questions (“Does anybody . . . ever really love more than one person at a time?”). Occasionally she wrote out of despair (“It seemed as though the world was crumbling under my feet, so I wrote you a long letter”). These therapeutic interactions allowed her to develop her ideas, motivated her to remain active within America’s cultural circles, and afforded her refuge from the emotional ravages of her neurasthenia.

Encouraged by her relationship with Mitchell, Mason combined her therapeutic need for intellectual activity and writing with her dedication to keeping culture alive in modern America. Emblematic of this is The Women of the French Salons, the product of seven years of European archival research and personal interviews, which was a clarion call for American women to mobilize in defense of a national culture she thought threatened by “false standards” and “aggressive materialism.” “It is in France that we find the forerunners of the intelligent, self-poised, clear-sighted, independent modern woman,” she observed in her preface.

59. Mitchell, Fat and Blood (n. 24). Interestingly, Joan Jacobs Brumberg has likened some cases of neurasthenia to a sort of nineteenth-century anorexia: neurasthenics were typically thought of as skinny, malnourished, and victims of improper eating habits. See Brumberg, Fasting Girls (n. 5).


63. Ibid., p. 173. George Cookin has observed that hobbies such as these, especially photography, were thought to be feminine activities in the late nineteenth century: see Cookin, Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880–1900 (New York: Twayne, 1992).

64. S. Weir Mitchell, Roland Blake (New York: Century, 1915). Although this strategy may seem a superficial cure to some therapists today, one must keep in mind that facing personal psychological problems did not become a widely accepted form of therapy until the arrival of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic strategies in the twentieth century. See Gosling, Before Freud (n. 8); Shorter, From Paralysis to Fatigue (n. 12).

65. Mitchell to Mason, 12 [no month] 1900, MP-CPP.

66. Mason to Mitchell, 16 September 1912, MP-CPP.

67. Mason to Mitchell, 17 February 1912, MP-CPP.

68. Mason to Mitchell, 30 November 1911, MP-CPP.

American women should look to the salon matrons of France, who guided their national culture through a century of political and social upheaval, as models for how to save an American culture threatened by encroaching modernity. With this book, Mason sought to perpetuate the model of woman-as-intellectual that she had first encountered a quarter-century earlier with Kate Newell Doggett and Madame d’Héricourt, and to use it as the template for the ideal modern American woman—a cultural counterbalance to the materialistic modern man. Women of the French Salons acted as a response to Mitchell’s claim that women best served their nation by remaining healthy and bearing children, a belief that categorically excluded the neurasthenic and childless Mason. Mason celebrated the vitalizing potential for educated women of all ages—married or unmarried, with or without children, sick or healthy—to strengthen their nation through cultural and intellectual endeavors.

Sarah Butler Wister

Sarah Butler Wister was another intellectual and accomplished neurasthenic patient of Weir Mitchell. Born in 1835, she was of the same generation as Mason but she identified more closely with the traditional domestic sphere than did Mason. It was these things—taking care of her husband, son, and large family estate—that she cherished, but that she nonetheless believed lay at the root of her neurasthenia. In contrast to Mason’s relationship with Mitchell, which began as that of a patient and her physician and evolved into a friendly, intellectual exchange, Wister was Mitchell’s cousin first and his patient second. Consequently their letters were typically intimate, dealing with family matters more often than with health. Yet each looked to the other for professional aid: Mitchell relied on Wister as an informal editor of his novels and, according to his biographer, as the model for several of his heroines, whereas Wister relied on Mitchell for medical advice.70

Wister was the oldest daughter in a family that was troubled from the start. Her father, Pierce Butler, owned Georgia plantations and was one of the largest slaveholders of the antebellum period. Her mother, the famous English actress Fanny Kemble, was an ardent abolitionist. Kemble, who claimed that she did not know the source of her husband’s income until after they had married, wrote treatises against slavery throughout the late 1830s, the most famous being Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation (later published during the Civil War). Unwilling to live with her slaveholding husband and abide by his increasingly abusive ways, she left for London in 1845 to rekindle an acting career, only to return to America three years later to defend herself unsuccessfully against divorce when Butler sued on grounds of abandonment. Sarah and her sister Frances both stayed in the custody of their father. Despite Kemble’s flight to London and subsequent divorce, the young Wister grew to appreciate her mother’s abolitionism and artistic interests.71

Wister’s adult life both rejected and resembled that of her mother. She married Dr. Owen Jones Wister, a Quaker, in 1859 and had one son, Owen Jr. (author of The Virginian, 1902). She and her family lived at Butler Place, her father’s eighty-two-acre estate in Philadelphia, where she took her housekeeping and mothering duties seriously until her death in 1908. Wister kept up her mother’s artistic tradition by writing poetry and essays and by entertaining literary figures such as William Dean Howells, Henry James, and the English poet Matthew Arnold (whose Culture and Anarchy had heavily influenced Mason).72 Befitting a woman who grew up with ideologically opposed parents, Wister tended to strike a balance in her friendships and politics. One of her closest confidants since childhood was Weir Mitchell, with whom she traded family gossip and exchanged emotional support during difficult times. Another of her close friends was Agnes Irwin, the principal of a girl’s school in Philadelphia, co-editor with Wister of a centennial volume entitled Worthy Women of Our First Century (1877), and eventually the dean of Radcliffe College.73 As for journalism, Wister divided her reading between the progressive Nation and Herbert Welsh’s anti-imperialist City and State.74

Wister closely identified with her roles of wife and mother. Like Mason, she found herself having to take care of a sick husband. Owen Sr. suffered from a nervous collapse in 1869 (reportedly from overwork) and afterward demanded constant attention, often reminding his wife that his “happiness depended on her.” This dependence grew into an obsession during the last few years of his life when, according to a family history, he could not bear to be apart from his wife.75 Their son, Owen Jr.,

70. Earnest, S. Weir Mitchell (n. 22), pp. 73, 130.
72. Ibid., pp. 5, 7.
73. Mrs. O. J. Wister and Agnes Irwin, eds., Worthy Women of Our First Century (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1877). Although Irwin and Mitchell had opposing views on what constituted the proper education for young women, the two knew each other and kept up a friendly correspondence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
74. Sarah Butler Wister to S. Weir Mitchell, 18 August 1897, MP-CPP, series 4.3, box 9. All future references to the Wister-Mitchell letters come from the same series and box.
75. Wister, That I May Tell You (n. 71), pp. 11–12.
also relied heavily on her mother for assurance and support. She aggressively defended his decision to study music and become a writer, much to his father’s chagrin; in return, he faithfully wrote to her while he was away from home and pleaded with her to write him more often during his frequent bouts of homesickness. Wister wanted to foster cosmopolitan sensibilities in her husband and son and was concerned that they would be unduly influenced by the rustic Quaker ways of her in-laws. Consequently, she developed a reputation as an arrogant, exacting, and demanding woman who kept a careful—if not jealous—eye on her family.

Poor health and feelings of isolation dogged Wister most of her life as she found herself surrounded by nervous sickness within her own family. In addition to her husband’s illness, her son experienced a nervous breakdown in 1884, and her sister-in-law (also named Sarah) consistently suffered as what Wister disparagingly called a “demi-malade imaginaire.”

Looking back on her life, Wister recalled that her most profound problems began when she was only fifteen and developed a morbid desire for death—a desire that she told Mitchell was the “longest, strongest wish of my life.” By the 1860s she began to experience chronic insomnia that lasted more than thirty years, ending temporarily around the time of her husband’s death in 1896 but beginning again after her son’s marriage in 1898. Wister relied heavily on personal relationships for peace of mind and stability. While in Europe with her mother in the summer of 1870, she experienced what historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg described as a “period of extreme anxiety” when faced with the marriage of her intimate childhood friend Jeannie Field Musgrove. The loss of friends and family aggravated her neurasthenia, causing incapacitating neck and back pain. “I felt a terrible nervous jab,” Wister admitted to Mitchell upon hearing of the passing of family friend and prominent Philadelphia physician Dr. Jacob DaCosta; “I was really helpless. I [couldn’t] bear the fatigue of keeping house.”

Even when faced with a good friend’s death, Wister could not put housekeeping out of her mind. She both resented it as a chore and cherished it as a responsibility. She explained to Mitchell how it “infuriated” her when she had to stop reading an engrossing book to attend to housework, a task that she complained required “immense attention.” Yet when she relied on a maid to help her “escape” the demands of domestic work, she found herself in a “mad gallop for errands [and] chores” to occupy her until late into the evening, by which time she was “too tired” to even read a book or write a letter. Keeping house was never easy for Wister, and it exacerbated her nervous disposition. Her first test was in 1861 when she supervised the spring cleaning of the sizeable Butler Place. Despite precautions, workers’ attempts to white-wash and clean the chimneys resulted in a fiasco that filled the house with “an avalanche of soot.”

Directing hired help frustrated her completely. “The servants despite their lofty pretension,” she wrote in her journal, “are just as incompetent as if they had never lived in a house in their life, & so inattentive that they forget your orders while you are speaking & disobey them under your eyes.” Reliant on servants with whom she had a strained relationship, and painfully aware of the potential pitfalls of running a large estate, Wister knew that housekeeping was her nemesis; “I have not the physical strength for it nor the moral serenity,” she observed during that first fateful seasonal cleaning. In 1881, after twenty years of “household worry,” her health finally gave out with what historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg described as a “terrible nervous breakdown” followed by two years of melancholia; she blamed housekeeping, yet she could not find it in her to put it aside. Upon recovery she continued to supervise the upkeep of Butler Place for another twenty years.

Given her compulsion to overwork, Wister found solace in a treatment...
for neurasthenia that permitted her periods of industriousness while offering relaxation and recuperation: taking prescribed breaks. The idea of taking a break from stressful work was not new to Wister. After all, her cousin Dr. Mitchell had become a minor celebrity for advising people to take holidays, and her son Owen Jr. had traveled out west in 1884 to overcome his own bout of neurasthenia. (He avidly wrote about the experience to his mother, and used it as the basis of his widely popular cowboy novel *The Virginian.* Without prescribed breaks, relaxing did not seem to be possible for her, especially during the final years of her husband’s life when he was particularly demanding of her time. As her doctor, Mitchell advised her to dedicate time every day to painting watercolor landscapes. In trying to “prove” to herself whether she had any skill at painting, Wister ended up spending two to three hours outdoors by herself every morning during the summer of 1893. She found it an invigorating experience, as it forced her to stay in the fresh air “twice as much as usual” and gave her “tranquility of mind.” “For this,” she enthusiastically wrote to Mitchell, “I am your willing debtor.”

The recognition that it was important to set aside time for herself marked a growing understanding on Wister’s part that modern women could disregard the common expectation that their efforts should remain focused on the family. During a discussion in 1895 of why women so rarely did “first-rate work in art or literature,” she asserted to Mitchell that the answer lay in their overwhelming domestic responsibilities and their lack of personal time; it was simply impossible for women to “protect themselves from interruptions—the constant necessity of ‘side tracking.’” George Sand, Wister pointed out, did her best work when she lived “à la Bohème without domestic ties or cares” so she could rigidly enforce her “daily privilege of solitude while writing.” Wister also looked to George Eliot, who she argued had produced her most complete works only after her companion, the writer George Lewes, was at hand to “relieve her of every trivial task.” The example of Wister’s mother, Fanny Kemble, who found it impossible to play at once the roles of traditional wife and successful actress, may have also helped her believe in the incompatibility of complete dedication to the family and artistic excellence. If women were to develop their individual talents and identities, she felt, they needed to take the potentially unorthodox step of safeguarding personal time. 

After the death of her husband, Wister was free to spend the spring and summer convalescing in a resort in rural Summerville, South Carolina, where she found the environment she needed to revitalize her ailing mind and body. A masseuse who traveled around town on a bicycle was on hand to ease her back pains—but most important, she had solitude. “I never had a more peaceful Easter tide,” she recalled; she was “alone, quite alone for the hotel was empty save for one quiet family and two invisible invalids.” Away from the burdens, bustle, and memories of Butler Place, Wister could contemplate her widowhood and her son’s impending marriage without distraction. In time she met local people, wealthy and poor, old and young, sick and healthy, and these meetings developed into a community of sorts that helped alleviate some of her nervousness as she realized that her new acquaintances had the same “family worries” she did. “I was calming and fortifying my soul and, for the first time with any sort of success, [trying] to reconstruct my remnant of life,” she later wrote Mitchell. She did not rely exclusively on Summerville for relaxation, and on other occasions she visited Homestead Hot Springs in Virginia, where she received regular courses of baths and treatments that mercifully created a “general inability and disinclination for the least mental exertion.” The prescribed necessity for physical, mental, and emotional relaxation essentially gave Wister permission to take a break from her household duties and develop a greater sense of herself.

Vacations became part of Wister’s lifestyle and complemented her

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94. Wister to Mitchell, 3 September 1893, MP-CPP. As mentioned earlier, Mitchell often prescribed painting to his patients: see Mitchell, *Doctor and Patient* (n. 26), pp. 167–68.

95. Wister to Mitchell, 22 September 1895, MP-CPP.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. Virginia Woolf, also a neurasthenic, famously elaborated on this same theme more than thirty years later in *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929) and *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938).

99. Wister to Mitchell, 10 August 1897, MP-CPP.

100. Ibid.

101. Wister to Mitchell, 28 September 1903, MP-CPP.

102. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has made similar observations about the role hysteria played in allowing women to escape, avoid, and redefine their domestic roles. See Smith-Rosenberg, *‘Hysterical Woman’* (n. 11).
sometimes self-destructive dedication to housekeeping. In the summer of 1902, after ten days of “laborious and lugubrious” work to get Butler Place ready for tenants, she took a short trip outside Philadelphia to Whitemarsh. “I have had a peaceful, pleasant halt,” she wrote to Mitchell, “and a little of this soreness of every sort has gone.” 105 Given her driven personality, it is hardly surprising that she contemplated combining her honed domestic skills with her interest in vacations. While staying at the Pine Forest Inn at Summerville during the spring of 1900, she brought to Mitchell’s attention a business opportunity: an old hotel in Green Cove, Florida, with acres of land and a natural spring, had burned down, and Wister believed it could be rebuilt and operated as a successful resort if investors could be found. 104 There is no evidence that her plans came to fruition, but she continued to spend a large part of each year until her death vacationing in places such as South Carolina’s Summerville, Maryland’s Deer Park, and Virginia’s Homestead Hot Springs.

Wister was joining a growing population of late nineteenth-century Americans who made travel and vacations parts of a modern lifestyle. 105 As historian Cindy Aron has demonstrated, previous generations looked at vacations with “fear and anxiety” because such breaks were leisure, and Americans associated leisure with slothfulness and weak character. But as the nineteenth century came to a close and the railroad system opened the continent to the growing numbers of citizens with disposable incomes, Aron argues, Americans overcame their distrust of vacations by making their trips busy with rigorous, hectic itineraries and, in the case of sojourns at health spas, strict regimens. 106 Keeping in mind that the label “neurasthenia” already carried with it the connotation of working too much, rather than too little, Sarah Wister’s case suggests that the diagnosis offered another way that Americans could justify taking vacations without appearing lazy. She did not vacation simply to avoid work; rather, she vacationed so that she could revitalize herself and continue to work.

105. Wister to Mitchell, 12 June 1902, MP-CPP.
104. Wister to Mitchell, 22 April 1900, MP-CPP.
105. One cannot help but think of Wister’s vacation habit as part of the modern culture of consumption that was enticing neurasthenics through advertisements for products—and holidays—to ensure good health. See, e.g., F. J. Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 157-258; Gosling, Before Freud (n. 8), pp. 106-42; Sarah Stage, Female Complaints: Lydia Pinkham and the Business of Women’s Medicine (New York: Norton, 1979). Germany also appears to have cultivated a culture of consumption among neurasthenics: see Heinz-Peter Schmiedebach’s excellent essay “The Public’s View of Neurasthenia in Germany: Looking for a New Rhythm of Life,” in Gijswijt and Porter, Cultures of Neurasthenia (n. 10), pp. 219-38.
107. The story is well known: With the birth of her daughter, Gilman experienced “dragging weariness miles below zero. Absolute incapacity. Absolute misery”—an intolerable condition that eventually led her to Mitchell. 108 Thinking that he might find an account of her illness useful, she wrote up her own case history in preparation for their meeting; yet rather than being pleased, Mitchell shocked her by dismissing her effort as an act of “self-conceit.” Their relationship deteriorated from there. In her autobiography, Gilman claimed that Mitchell never understood her condition because she was neither of the two types of patients he was “well versed” in: neurasthenic businessmen “exhausted from too much work,” and neurasthenic society women “exhausted from too much play.” 109 A hasty judgment on Gilman’s part, it was nonetheless revealing of the difficulty she and Mitchell had in relating to one another. Decades before postpartum depression would be widely recognized, Mitchell fell back on the diagnosis of neurasthenia and treated Gilman with his trademark rest cure, which she took with “utmost confi-
dence.” After supervising a month of enforced bed rest, sponge baths, and massages, he declared her cured and discharged her with the infamous prescription to “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 pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.”

For months, Gilman “rigidly” followed Mitchell’s orders and avoided intellectual activity. Yet rather than getting better, she found herself “perilously near” to losing her mind and took to playing with a rag doll and hiding in the closet. “The mental agony grew so unbearable,” she later recalled, “that I would sit blankly moving my head from side to side—to get out from under the pain.”

Five years later in 1892, she used this experience and its “mental torture” as the basis for her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” whose protagonist was slowly driven insane by the rest cure’s intellectual and social isolation.

The question still remains of why Mitchell, who encouraged women such as Mason and Wister to occupy themselves with intellectual and artistic pursuits, would want to ban Gilman from these activities. The most likely answer is a common one in the annals of medicine: he misdiagnosed the cause of her neurasthenia and consequently mistreated her. After seeing her self-written case study and talking with her, he probably thought that her intellectual and literary activities were too introspective and, consequently, too near the “morbid thoughts” that made neurasthenia such a debilitating illness. Such a conclusion on his part would have been only partly off the mark. In her autobiography, Gilman remembered being “exclusively occupied with unpleasant things” before seeing Mitchell. She recalled suffering from “every painful mental sensation, shame, fear, remorse, a blind oppressive confusion, utter weakness, a steady brainache that fills the conscious mind with crowding images of distress.”

When she met Mitchell, her mind appeared to be the cause of her problem, not its solution.

110. Ibid., p. 96.

111. Ibid.

112. Part of the folklore surrounding “The Yellow Wallpaper” is that Gilman sent Mitchell a copy of the story in the hopes that he would read it and make his rest cure more humane; she claimed that her strategy worked and that Mitchell modified his therapy on her account. This story, however, is unsubstantiated, and Gilman’s influence on Mitchell is questioned by Suzanne Poirier in “The Weir Mitchell Rest Cure” (n. 11) and by Julie Bates Dock in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” and the History of Its Publication and Reception: A Critical Edition and Documentary Casebook (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).


115. Gilman’s more successful treatment under Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi (whom she visited fourteen years after Mitchell) was closer to Mason’s and Wister’s experience in that Gilman felt that she could work with her physician. As she had for Mitchell, she spent time preparing information about her illness to give Jacobi a “better understanding of the case,” which Jacobi gratefully accepted. Unlike Mitchell, Jacobi made the effort to get to know Gilman personally and design a therapy with her unique needs in mind: rather than rest, she asked her to practice working while ill; see Gilman, Living (n. 108), pp. 290–91. Morantz-Sanchez also found rapport to be the crucial difference between Gilman’s treatments under Mitchell and Jacobi: see Sympathy and Science (n. 54), pp. 213–14. As F. G. Gosling and Hilary Marland have pointed out, even the decision of whether or not to apply the diagnosis of neurasthenia was often dependent on the physician’s affinity with the patient: see Gosling, Before Freud (n. 8), pp. 145–65; Marland, “‘Uterine Mischief’” (n. 18).
Conclusion

The story of Mitchell, Mason, and Wister illustrates how neurasthenia was a very personal disease that physician and patients alike could craft to fit their personal sensibilities. Mitchell, a man of conservative temperament, saw the diagnosis as proof that American society was modernizing faster than people’s minds and bodies could keep up. Urbanization, competitive capitalism, and the growing women’s movement were not just distasteful to Mitchell: he saw them as actually harming people’s health and threatening the continued prosperity of the nation. He believed that Americans in the modern age needed to worry less, relax more, and fall back on traditional sex roles that he believed were natural and healthy. Physicians, however, did not wield ultimate authority over neurasthenia, and Mason and Wister did not passively accept Mitchell’s opinions. They may have relied on their doctor out of desperation, as Gilman did, but they also showed a propensity to reevaluate his opinions surrounding their condition—a process that proved critical to their recovery.

By encouraging people to combat morbid thoughts through strengthening their minds with intellectual and creative activities, Mitchell inadvertently provided a mechanism that allowed patients to question patriarchal beliefs that existed within medicine and society. Mason, who otherwise agreed with Mitchell on the unhealthy effects of modern capitalism, clearly rejected the limits he placed on women’s health and social roles. Her experience with neurasthenia and the therapeutic effects of thinking helped her envision an expanded public role for women as vital critics and caretakers of culture in a modern age. These occupations, she believed, would not only improve women’s personal health but would also help sustain a nation whose men had abandoned it for personal gain. Understood in a broader context, Mason represented a movement—which included another patient of Mitchell’s, fellow Chicagoan and Hull House founder Jane Addams—that used neurasthenia as a springboard for justifying the expanded social role for women on the grounds of both personal health and national progress.¹¹⁶

Not all neurasthenics called for social change, of course. Wister understood that the home was not always domestic bliss, as Mitchell had idealized it, but could be a source of unhealthy stress. Nevertheless, she closely identified with her domestic duties of housekeeping and caring for her family and was willing to fulfill these responsibilities even though they made her ill. Rather than rejecting her role as homemaker, she followed the therapeutic advice of Mitchell and placed limits on how much she worked. Modern lifestyles of leisure were followed. Traditional duties were preserved. Setting aside time to paint and to take personal vacations helped her understand the sacrifices women such as herself made for their families. It also granted her time she could call her own and made bearable her fastidious dedication to Butler Place.

Even Mason’s call for women to take a larger role in preserving national culture was consistent with the Victorian belief in women’s role as moral guide. Both she and Wister sought to expand women’s place in society, not redefine it altogether. In the process, neurasthenia ultimately helped Mason and Wister identify themselves within a modernizing America. The diagnosis did not make them into passive targets of medical opinion. Instead, it encouraged them to take control of their lives and their minds in the hopes of leading healthier lifestyles and avoiding the depths of sickness. This process of figuring out what made them healthy—“how to live in this stupid world,” as Mason put it—became a defining feature for them. It was a therapeutic ethos that did not rely on experts for solutions.¹¹⁷ Whether as moral anchors amid an increasingly superficial national culture or as participants in new lifestyles of vacation and leisure, the diverse lives these women created for themselves were largely the products of using their personal sensibilities to understand their neurasthenia.

¹¹⁶. Christopher Lasch has made the connection between Addams’s neurasthenia and her need for social activity in New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: The Intellectual as Social Type (New York: Knopf, 1965). Addams herself famously made the connection between social work and the neurasthenic condition in her 1893 essay “The Subjective Necessity for Social Settlements” that reappeared in her 1910 autobiography: Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull House (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999), pp. 90–96.

¹¹⁷. The therapeutic culture that Christopher Lasch identified in the second half of the twentieth century is much different from the therapeutic ethos of neurasthenia: Lasch’s culture relied on experts to tell people how to live their lives, while the neurasthenic therapeutic ethos gave people greater license to live their lives according to personal standards. In both cases, there was a psychological need to feel better. See Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New York: Warner Books, 1979).
"CURIOUSLY WITHOUT BODY":
THE HIDDEN LANGUAGE OF
ZONA GALE'S FAINT PERFUME

Susan Tomlinson

Conceive of never being without the sense that if you let yourself go for a moment your mechanism will fall into pie and at some given moment you must abandon it all, let the dykes break and the flood sweep in, acknowledging yourself abjectly impotent before the immutable laws. When all one's moral and natural stock in trade is a temperament forbidding the abandonment of an inch of the relaxation of a muscle, 'tis a never-ending fight.

—Alice James, *The Diary of Alice James*

After her weeks of numb withdrawal to be alive as she was alive now seemed a nakedness.

—Zona Gale, *Faint Perfume*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1935 autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, details her harrowing experience of Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure, the subject of her best-known work, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). Advised to "'have but two hours' intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live,'” Gilman writes, "I went home, followed those directions for months, and came perilously close near losing my mind" (96). In her foreword to her friend's autobiography, the bestselling novelist and Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Zona Gale (1874–1938) makes clear her own opinion of the rest cure: "One fact appears, that if ever a nervous case was misunderstood by a nerve specialist, it was hers—with the recommendation to 'rest and never touch a pen or brush for the duration of her life!' The 'grinding misery' of those days is in her face, in the photographs subsequent to 1884, her marriage year" (xxvii). Describing Gilman as "belong[ing] to some future," Gale interprets her friend's collapse as her body's repulsed reaction to domesticity (xxvii).

In light of her contempt for Gilman's medical treatment and awareness of its disastrous psychological cost, Gale's depiction of an afflicted woman writer in her 1923 novel *Faint Perfume* offers an implicit indictment of a medical treatment designed to treat intellectual, "overly stimulated" New Women by "defusing their ambitions and re-socializing them to their traditional sphere and its familial obligations" (Vertinsky 212). Gale's representation of her protagonist's condition and response to her physician's advice—almost verbatim to Mitchell's advice to Gilman—not to touch her pen offers an alternative to "The Yellow Wallpaper"; Gale depicts an unmarried, independent woman who submits to the medical establishment, puts down her pen, and returns to her father's house. Her obedience results in her participation in a series of romantic clichés: the stoic sufferer, the rescued damsel, the love-triangle corner, and, finally, the martyr. In contrast to Gilman and her heroine, who free themselves by recognizing and releasing their anger, Gale's protagonist represses hers and silently loses her mind, her work, and her identity.

Between 1906 and her death in 1938 Gale published twelve novels, nine short-story collections, one volume of poetry, and seven plays (including adaptations of her novels *Faint Perfume* in 1934 and *Miss Lulu Bett*, for which she became in 1921 the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for drama). Despite this prodigious literary output, her lifelong critical and commercial success, and her association with other prominent literary and political figures like Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather, twentieth-century literary history has consigned Gale to obscurity, categorized even by her biographer Harold S. Simonson as a "minor figure in American literature" (7). Like Gale's friend and fellow novelist Jessie Redmon Fauset, whose dominant critical reputation for primness and romantic excess has overshadowed her work's radical politics, Gale's obscurity results, in part, from her modernist refashioning of critically unfashionable concerns. Deborah Lindsay Williams's pioneering work on Gale draws important thematic parallels between both neglected modernist novelists who have been critically relegated to the margins:

Both Fauset and Gale wrote about and lived within their local communities and used this focus to challenge social
Those oaks, the pillars of nineteenth-century feminine identity, offer a vexed, unstable, and ultimately transformative perspective from which to consider the political and social questions raised by New Womanhood.

In her 1930 essay *On Being Ill*, Woolf wrote, “[I]t is not only a new language that we need [for illness], more primitive, more sexual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions” (7). And who needed this new language more urgently than the New Woman novelists, whose depictions of independent, creative, progressive women challenged the dominant Victorian ideologies of feminine passivity that historian Barbara Welter has termed the Cult of True Womanhood? Gale temporarily disables her protagonist’s writing arm, banishing her from the labor through which she defines herself and rendering her physically and financially dependent on others. By making Leda sick, Gale forges a new language of female corporeality, of mortal women whose human frailty does not render them frail, whose vulnerability to muscle strain does not define them as essentially vulnerable or biologically unfit to take care of themselves. As Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, the Victorian concept of woman as a figure of modern subjectivity "eventually hollows out the material body of the woman in order to fill it with materials of a gender-based self, or female psychology" (75). In response both to dominant Victorian linkages of female illness with mental and physical inferiority and to images of the androgynous, hearty, sporty New Woman—for example, the Gibson Girl and the flapper (Banta 85)—in the popular imagination, Gale seeks to make women flesh again, to fill up the female body not only with ideals and expectations but also with the physical realities of wellness and the real implications of its lack. By disabling the New Woman’s body and her access to the means by which she defines herself and realizes that self-definition, Gale’s novel demonstrates the discursive struggle to give the New Woman her body back. Leda’s silence around her affliction, the way the text allows the reader to forget that affliction, and how Leda’s pain gets lost in the household melodrama raise crucial issues of narrative feminist resistance and the price—real and textual—of that resistance. Gale positions Leda on the borders of Victorian invalidism and the equally oppressive expectations of New Woman robustness.

*Faint Perfume* opens with its protagonist estranged from the work and cultural environment that defined her. Leda, a twenty-seven-year-old New York writer who, stricken with neuritis in her writing arm, is "forbidden" by her physician "to touch her pen" for a year and returns to her Midwestern hometown to recover (40). Before she can explain this return to her loving but financially impractical father,

Indeed, Fauset’s and Gale’s insistence on working their political agendas and narrative reformulations in romantic plots and female-centered communities has ensured their middlebrow status, and Williams rightly challenges dominant masculinist criteria for modernist fiction that continue to obscure Fauset, Gale, and so many of their peers. “Serious literature, truly American literature, it would seem, is terrifying, impressive, precise, concerned primarily with men hovering on the brink of madness. In Gale’s books almost no one ever dies, suffering is often alleviated, and there is a general feeling that society is going to change for the better, all of which become signs of her inability to grasp the inherently ‘tragic’ quality of life in the United States” (165). Williams’s assertion of Gale’s radical progressivism as innately optimistic, however, obscures the novelist’s formal experimentation with darker themes. The Friendship Village of her earlier fiction gives way to the murderously oppressive Burage (in *Birth*, 1918), Warbleton (in *Miss Lulu Bett*, 1920), and the grimly named Prospect in *Faint Perfume*, whose protagonist’s response to illness and dependence challenges the Victorian cult of female invalidism; she exposes the violence of bourgeois social convention. Moreover, Gale’s depiction of Leda reveals the challenge of recognizing and representing female sexuality beyond stereotypical excess or abstention. *Faint Perfume’s* hidden subjects are its protagonist’s repressed anger and her relationship not to her lover but to her emergent sexual identity, her “woman-love and more,” sacrificed to a social order as barren as the town’s rusting oil pump (159).

This article examines the narrative and political functions of illness in *Faint Perfume*. Maneuvering in the vast shadow thrown by the invalid woman in nineteenth-century domestic fiction, Gale’s representation of her protagonist’s affliction complicates the popular discourse of New Womanhood as a response to the True Woman paradigm that had cornered the narrative market on illness and confinement. Through not only her protagonist’s response to illness but also her novel’s silences surrounding pain, loss, and dependence, Gale addresses the pathologized notions of femininity present in the New Woman’s mindset and in her cultural milieu. Gale invites her readers to explore what Virginia Woolf described as the "ancient and obdurate oaks [that are] uprooted in us by the act of sickness" (3).
he dies, his money invested so unwisely that Leda’s inheritance is wiped out and she is forced to move in with her relatives, the Crumbs. While Leda finds living with her unsophisticated cousins oppressive, she recognizes her affinity with their grandfather, who, in the face of his family’s patronizing treatment, fights to maintain his dignity and independence. Leda’s traumatic situation is overshadowed by the return from Europe of Richmiel, her glamorous cousin who has divorced the successful writer Barnaby and has stopped in Prospect to deposit her young son, Oliver, with the family before heading to California. The Crumb household, people with stock figures of feminine excess in contrast to Leda’s austerity and emotional restraint, becomes the site of Leda’s sexual awakening when she falls in love with Barnaby, who arrives in Prospect to claim his son. Barnaby and Leda plan a life together in Europe with Oliver until Richmiel threatens to keep Oliver unless Leda and Barnaby separate. Leda forsakes her future with Barnaby, Grandfather Crumb chooses suicide over a dependent life, and Leda and Barnaby promise to reunite, someday.

Leda’s is a body in pain, and the novel’s plot is founded on and enabled by the fact of that pain. Leda is exiled from her New Woman lifestyle—independence and self-definition—because her disability prevents her from writing and earning a living. Unlike Gilman, who railed against the rest cure in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and later in her autobiography, the fictional Leda follows her doctor’s advice not to touch her pen. The novel begins with Leda already returned to Prospect; her life in New York as an independent writer remains glaringly outside the text. The Leda of *Faint Perfume* is literally and metaphorically disabled, a New Woman betrayed by her own body, a body in crisis that will not perform the function that enables her financial independence and means of creative self-expression. Seeking a second opinion, Leda explains to a local physician that “it was imperative that she return to work; [she] was accused of her sleepless nights and of the devouring pain; was warned that she had one chance to avoid a long illness, and that chance was rest. She disbelieved, raged, brought no alternative; angrily told him it was laughable to be a mind and a spirit caught in a web of no money” (63–64). Despite her anger expressed in the physician’s office, the only scene in which she voices rage at her condition, Leda heeds this doctor’s warning as well.

Late-twentieth-century critical studies of illness and pain, particularly Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor* and Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*, are helpful in unpacking the narrative and political meanings of Leda’s condition, specifically how and to what extent Gale chooses to represent her protagonist’s bodily crisis. In focusing on cultural exploitations of cancer and tuberculosis as cultural metaphors, Sontag warns that using illness as a social metaphor erases real bodily suffering as well as the suffering body. Sontag writes,

*Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning—that meaning being invariably a moralistic one. Any disease whose causality is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance. First, the subjects of deepest dread (corruption, decay, pollution, anomie, weakness) are identified with the disease. The disease itself becomes a metaphor. Then, in the name of the disease, (that is, using it as a metaphor), that horror is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival.* (58)

However, by making Leda’s richly suggestive neuritis (also known as *tic douloureux*) the very origin of the novel, Gale invites her reader to explore fully its metaphorical riches in the safe, nonpunitive space of fiction. The deliberateness and specificity of Leda’s condition is neither accidental nor innocent. In *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences*, Weir Mitchell’s colleague George M. Beard argues that writer’s cramp afflicts normally robust people who, unaccustomed to physical weakness, ignore early symptoms and further damage themselves.

Those who are sensitive, and nervous and delicate, whom every external or internal irritation injures, and who appreciate physical injury instantly, as soon as the exciting cause begins to act, cannot write long enough to get writer’s cramp; they are warned by uneasiness of pain, by weariness, local or general, and are forced to interrupt their labors before there has been time to receive a fixed or persistent disease. Hence it is that those who suffer from this disorder are surprised when the symptoms come upon them; they declare they have always been well, and wonder that they do not continue so: had they been feeble they would have been unable to persevere in the use of the pen so as to invite permanent nervous disorder. (286)

In Beard’s analysis, writer’s cramp—which in Leda’s case has worsened to full-blown neuritis—demonstrates not only a refusal but also a constitutional inability to act like an invalid. By writing through her initial discomfort, “continu[ing] a life of excessive friction” (287), Leda exhausts the muscles necessary to her work. In Beard’s schema, Leda emerges as a victim of her own refusal to accept physical weakness. How, then, might we understand a novel whose protagonist’s self-ex-
pression, means of earning a living, and means of understanding and ordering the world through her writing, is paralyzed, forbidden from the novel’s start? As a writer who cannot write, as an independent woman who cannot live independently, as an urban woman marooned in a provincial town, Leda’s life becomes a New Woman nightmare. Her throbbing arm rips her from a modern mode of womanhood and consigns her to a regressive, almost Victorian position—the maiden cousin dependent on the kindness and largesse of relatives, the excess woman in the household. At the same time, Leda refuses to wield whatever cultural power her illness might afford her—to use her condition as a means of securing attention and having her way in a household whose lingua franca is female stereotype.

Leda’s medical condition, pace Sontag, offers the novel’s most fitting adjective. *Faint Perfume* emerges as a neuritic novel, one whose narrative muscles dolorously seize up, tremble, and flare under the strain of a political and cultural burden. The novel projects onto its reader the expectations that mirror Leda’s hopes for an intelligent diagnosis; the ideal reader, like the ideal doctor, can read Leda’s symptoms holistically and interpret her responses through cultural lenses adjusted by modernism and feminism. Gale frustrates her resistive reader with a protagonist who passively obeys advice that Gilman (among others) has trained us to regard as medically and culturally suspect. The plot hinges on two physicians’ conclusions that, in order to get well, Leda must not write. A third opinion might not only challenge that advice but also question Leda’s ready acquiescence, her resignation to putting down her pen and giving up her financial and domestic independence. Leda’s leap from acute muscle strain to total dependence on cousins she loathes is narratively illogical only if we assume that the illogic is unintended. Her obedience to her doctors’ advice, coupled with the further trauma to which the plot subjects her, becomes her most salient symptom. Gale charges her reader with the responsibility to be the text’s good doctor who recognizes Leda’s passivity and self-abnegation as signs of collapse.

A reading of *Faint Perfume* as deliberately neuritic replaces the most readily apparent reading of Leda’s disabled arm as symbolizing her loss of voice with that of Leda’s strained, overtaxed writing arm representing a strained, or straining, voice that seeks to articulate meanings beyond the available language. Contrary to Williams’s suggestion that Gale remains an obscure author because she “is neither angry nor alienated,” *Faint Perfume* proves alienating to twenty-first-century readers because Gale, while creating in Leda one of the angriest and most alienated characters in female modernism, does not depict her protagonist’s anger so much as the physical, psychological, and social consequences of its suppression.

On the wall of her room here at the Crumbs’ she had set that day the portrait of her father who looked like Dante; the Cornish silhouettes, delicate profiles, slender throats [her long-dead mother was from Cornwall, and these portraits of fine English women are her maternal legacy]; and about her sounded familiar rumors of the distant and the past. All these she had sunk into the wall-paper, to be devoured by the air of that room. Now she opened the window to the odor of snow, the thin wash of starlight, the stillness of the village street. But there entered no shy besieging sense of reality, like the surge of love, in which she was accustomed to meet the open air not as watcher but as participant. It was as if this, too, were devoured by the air of that room. She sat there, empty. She became sharply aware of the pressure of pain in shoulder and arm. (39)
The figure of the invalid woman insists on a reading that focuses on the play of power and desire in the narrative, the family, and the culture. The woman who becomes sick is portrayed as a figure with no power, subject to the whims of her body or mind, or as a figure with enormous power, able to achieve her desires through the threat of her imminent death or disability. Sometimes she is both powerful and powerless. . . . Reading the narrative of the invalid demands that one examine the attraction and the repulsion of this figure for readers and for writers and analyze how the narrative power of the invalid translates into cultural power or the lack of it. One must recognize the anger at powerlessness but also the uses of (apparent) powerlessness. (4)

Gale offers a protagonist who resists the potential cultural power of her condition; she refuses an invalid identity that is more than available and that would be certain to secure her some measure of power in the Crumb household. But Leda suffers silently, and that silence translates into textual silence. Elaine Scarry's linkage of pain's expression with its appropriation suggests a resistive nature to Leda's silent suffering: "The failure to express pain—whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body—will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation" (14). By keeping Leda's affliction central to the plot but enigmatic within the text, Gale mirrors her protagonist's stoic response to pain by making it the reader's responsibility to read the pain and Leda's actions through that pain's concealment. Similarly, the reader is compelled by the novel's Victorian ancestry and its author's political and literary kinship with Gilman to give readerly voice to Leda's silence. Faint Perfume conspires with its protagonist to conceal its anguish and to dare the reader not, like everyone else in Leda's life—her father, doctors, and extended family—to fail her, not to fail to read her silence.

As a character who in the first chapter loses her income, her father, her home, her inheritance, and her independence, Leda's dignified silence becomes the novel's anguished cry, the monstrous figure emerging from the wallpaper. Gale depicts the Crumbs' domesticity as noisy and petty, but her repeated representations of Leda's contempt for and blaming of them for her misery, considering the lack of representations of her bereavement, anger at the loss of her money and freedom, and inability to imagine alternative living or working arrangements, imply a far graver affliction than neuritis—trauma and subjective collapse. Reflecting on her cousins' patronizing treatment and cultural simplicity but suppressing her reactions triggers Leda's physical paralysis and psychological terror: "Either I shall turn to stone in time or I shall shout at them. Shout out and say. . . ." She began to think what she should say. Her body ached with the ache of her shoulder, and in her head was a familiar numbness" (79). Gale draws an unmistakable link between Leda's physical pain and her self-censorship. Leda imbibes the Crumbs with the power to undo her, to rob her of her creativity, her identity, her very voice: "I had a thousand interests. The Crumb household has cut them all off. Is it making me primitive in this too?" (86) The likelihood that her father's recent, sudden death as well as her estrangement from the work that defines her might render her temporarily "primitive" gets lost in Leda's violent, internalized responses to domestic annoyance. Gale's omniscient narrator articulates her protagonist's primitive, inarticulable depersonalization.

Linda Grasso's identification of anger as one of women's literature's organizing principles reveals the textual function and political meanings of Leda's silence.

[1]Illnesses, acts of sacrifice, supplicating tones, captivity motifs, death, hunger, and emaciated bodies are also telltale signs—the textual gestures if you will—of women's forbidden angry expression. Recognizing how these gestures function in ideological contexts in which women are relegated to separate, unequal spheres in the public imagination provides insight into how women respond to oppression and exclusion, their own and that of the others with whom they identify—the enslaved, the powerless, and the economically disenfranchised. (5)

Leda's inability to express the most logical response to her myriad crises (illness, loss, impoverishment, isolation), coupled with her elitist contempt for her conservative, financially secure cousins, suggests the text's representation of the struggle to articulate female anger and to negotiate the physical and psychic toil of that struggle. Sneering at her cousins' vulgarity is easier, more acceptable, than raging at her father for dying penniless, at her doctors for patronizing her, and even at herself for not succeeding in New York and achieving sound financial independence that might have saved her from Prospect. By physically, emotionally, and financially disabling an independent female figure, Gale exposes the stark realities of social powerlessness that threaten to undermine the New Woman project.
In light of her own career as a novelist and political activist who remained both prolific and socially committed after leaving New York at age thirty-seven in 1911 and moving home to Portage, Wisconsin, and whose best-known fiction depicts complex, politically nuanced if unworlly Midwesterners, Gale’s representation of Leda’s social contempt, especially for small-town women, suggests the character’s failed creative imagination. The self-containment and independence that Gale extols in her 1928 essay “The United States and the Artist” are the very qualities Leda lacks: “All the days would be the same. One wouldn’t be invited to lunch, because one doesn’t play bridge. One wouldn’t be invited to dinner, because one isn’t married. One’s evening would be intact because one doesn’t dance. But an intimate touch with the town would be held in other ways—by school, park, library, and many a hearth” (102). Gale contrasts her own bittersweet self-reliance as a female artist in a non-urban community with Leda’s social alienation. The town of Prospect remains tantalizingly outside the novel, which claustrophobically confines itself and Leda in a conventional middle-class home where women fuss over table settings and floating candles. Leda’s domestic resocialization culminates in her taking a more traditional recourse for feminine distress: “From head to foot Leda burned with a great fire, as if her body became a blazing signal for help. ‘Somebody come. Barnaby Powers! Barnaby Powers!’” (48).

Alice Lebanon, the novel’s unseen other New Woman, also complicates Leda’s attitude toward Prospect, suggesting a connection between Leda’s dim view of the town and her own dimmed personal and artistic prospects. Alice is referred to several times as Leda’s childhood friend, an artist now living in Chicago who lends Leda and Barnaby her studio for their rendezvous. Although Chicago is a short train journey from Portage, the novel stages no meeting between the two women, suggesting that Leda’s lonely exile is to some degree exaggerated and her dependence on Barnaby questionable. While Alice herself never appears in the novel, her work does: “The walls [of Alice’s studio] were windows into Prospect. It might be two score of monotypes—Prospect all: The Square, the Point, the Ridge, the little streets” (166). Like Gale’s own literary reclaiming of Midwestern America, Alice’s prints reframe Prospect as a subject to be studied and represented, a site for return rather than escape. Alice can represent Prospect over and over; like Andy Warhol’s compulsively repeated car wrecks and bloodstained Jackie Kennedys, her work commodifies the banal and the sublime, draining its original power and inscribing a new meaning. Through her pictures Alice asserts an artistic authority over Prospect and, in contrast with Leda, a refusal to be controlled and undone by its conventions.

Gale’s explicit linkage of Leda’s physical agony with her exclusive fixation on her cousin’s ex-husband’s arrival marks the ensuing romance as a further sign—and site—of narrative trauma. Recalling that “exquisite being” smoldering with sexual intensity at his wedding years earlier, Leda anticipates her fellow writer’s arrival as bringing life force to what she perceives as a deadening household (130). Ultimately, however, Barnaby’s arrival diverts the plot from a possible exploration of Leda’s psychological condition to a Cinderella-style romance in which the mousy poor relation is chosen over her formidably glamorous and overtly sexual relative. Barnaby’s international renown and commercial success (enough to finance a globe-trotting lifestyle and the lavish taste of his ex-wife, Richmiel), juxtaposed with Leda’s writerly impotence and destitution, establish the gendered power imbalance reinforced by his surname.

Gale reformulates popular romantic paradigms to represent Leda and Barnaby’s developing relationship, depicting Barnaby’s attraction to Leda as his recognition of her superiority: She was so serene, so shining. He marveled at her, a normal human creature, yet with the poise and brightness and clarity of some other being. She felt his scrutiny, turned, smiled at him as one child smiles at another across a schoolroom. He thought: “Is she without sex? Then has she never reached it or has she transcended it?” He fell to speculating on the case of angels. “Perhaps they know something better.” (130)

That Leda’s superiority here lies in her apparent lack of sexual affect that—in contrast to the lushness of Richmiel’s depiction—suggests a sublime affinity;¹ Barnaby’s observation, however, also divorces Leda from the very body whose suffering has landed her there. Like her pain, Leda’s very body remains narratively hidden, a concealment Gale contrasts with her portrayal of Richmiel, Barnaby’s ex-wife, “flaxen, silken, slow, as thick and white as a Borgia; a product of Prospect cooled in a fancy mold” (54). Edith Wharton remarked to Gale that Faint Perfume should have featured Richmiel as its protagonist (Williams 22–23), and that character’s lush physicality certainly dominates each scene. Transcending sexuality obscures the body in pain as well as the body’s potential for pleasure. “She was on the ‘davenport,’ and buttressed by red satin pillows. Her yellow gown unclothed her. She sat, Leda saw, one foot outstretched, gilt slippered, an eloquently wifely wanton foot; her hands, those veined terribly experienced hands, lay in her lap, waiting; her eyes, double-lidded, heavy as for sleep, were immovably fixed upon [Barnaby]; some powerful principle of assertion, of perpetual physical affirma-
tion (89–90). This sumptuously Whartonesque figure embodies female sexual power as fierce, disordered, and destructive. Richmiel's body—and the desires it contains and articulates with a shift of weight or a slow blink—taps so much physical and narrative space that she pushes the novel's protagonist further to the margins of her text and her sex. That body secured for Richmiel what Leda's intellect and talent failed to achieve; it delivered Richmiel from Prospect's narrow confines and to a cosmopolitan arena where she reinvented herself. Richmiel's sexual and textual dominance assaults the New Woman body struggling to refashion female power outside a heterosexuality that asserts a woman's sexuality as her only capital. Richmiel is, cruelly, a man's rich meal, a delicacy to be coveted and consumed.

Wharton's fascination with this Midwestern odalisque mirrors that of the text itself, which invites the reader to unclothe and inspect the desiring and desired female body for its secret. Richmiel's sexual power—as an object of desire—is bound with its corruption—that object's power to trade on its value and thereby perform as a subject. Gale depicts Barnaby as not merely a successful writer but also as a man almost mesmerized by the power his ex-wife continues to wield, first as his sexual partner and now as his child's mother. The novel's first image of Barnaby, in Leda's recollection of him at his wedding, is of a man "intent, silent, a hand covering his mouth, [as he watched] for Richmiel. . . . Leda had never forgotten him, that exquisite being, caught unaware" (46). What Leda remembers about Barnaby is how intensely he craved his bride. The narration directs the reader, too, to dwell on this represented body while "forgetting" the body unseen, Leda's.

Gale constructs a stark descriptive imbalance between Richmiel, "whose body had seemed nine-tenths of her being" (47), and Leda, whose own body remains textually invisible. *Faint Perfume* contains no physical descriptions of Leda besides one scene in which the cousins deride her simple (coded modernly minimalist and beyond their limited appreciation) outfit. By (to borrow Nancy Armstrong's phrase again) "hollowing out" Leda's body, the text marks Leda's body's inability to register its own meanings beyond the throbbing, disabled writing arm. Leda has, it implies, no body, only mind and arm, until Barnaby's recognition conjures it.

The pain was there, but unattended, like a flame in summer noon. . . . She felt a new technique of being. . . . She was permeated by Barnaby. Interpenetrating, fusing. By the measure of her fineness she exceeded the experience of her kind; by her simplicities she was the more primitive. She noted, as of one apart, that her mind was almost in suspension. She had become an area of sensation, of song. (116)

Juxtaposed with its expert practitioner, Leda awakens to a new technique of being, her own desire to meld with another person that, she observes, shuts down the mind by which she had defined herself. Gale's own technique for rendering Leda remains abstraction, representing Leda as a figure of sensation (muscular pain replaced by sexual longing) while continuing to obscure the sentient body.

If we read *Faint Perfume* as a narrative of lost independence, the rescue logic of Leda's relationship with Barnaby only furthers that plot by foreclosing the potential narrative of recovery and restoration. While Leda's neuritic symptoms vanish after Barnaby's arrival, the textual neuritis flares up; unable to sustain its original course, it veers into one of feminine submission. Indeed, Leda's sexual awakening is the only "healing" the text affords her. Breaking from the romantic convention of New Woman literature, in which the heroine's intellectual/creative partnership with her lover infuses their sexual relationship with psychological and social equality, Gale depicts her lovers' planned future strictly within normative gender roles. Leda transfers her stultifying dependence on her cousins to an ostensibly empowering reliance on Barnaby for her very identity. "In the room above she heard the tread of Barnaby. . . . And in her there arose a sense of clear being. She felt able, she felt new. She had a fleeting impression of her essential self, the slow-breathing inner Her" (135). This "Her," born of and inextricably tied to Barnaby's presence, confirms Leda's entry into a sexual economy that makes her inner life legible only by giving it a conventional language. Gale juxtaposes Leda's inability to articulate pain and loss with the ready availability of a formulaic romance plot in which to lose herself. Leda can have an "inner Her" only by falling in love; the independent inner Her, whose lack is *Faint Perfume*'s hidden center, is further obscured by the love story.

Rather than writing a fairy-tale ending that sanctions its protagonist's newfound "technique of being," Gale's ambivalent conclusion highlights the psychological peril of Leda's expectations. Ceding her future with Barnaby to Richmiel's threat to keep Oliver, Leda passively surrenders her happiness and assumes another acceptably feminine role, the martyr: Gale reembodies Leda in order to represent her surrender's psychic toll and, more crucially, to return the narrative to its original question: what is the nature of Leda's pain and how does its inarticulation suggest her alienation from her body and its right to occupy space? Having come alive at the possibility of a life with Barnaby and away from loneliness, poverty, and creative stagnation, Leda's body seems poised to collapse at his loss: "She drew away
from him, looking so small, so worn, that her body seemed empty of her" (193). Equating Barnaby's loss with a loss of self returns Leda to the very place she was before his arrival, thereby establishing the text's anxiety around romantic love as an antidote to female anger and disempowerment. The novel leaves its protagonist in a subjective limbo; still not writing, still without money or her own home, still presumably suffering from neuritis, Leda now waits for Barnaby to contrive a reunion that will not threaten his son's custody.

Gale's linkage of this waiting with Grandfather Crumb's suicide not only implies the living death to which Leda's self-martyrdom consigns her but also completes the parallel dependence narrative that the grandfather's condition provided. Learning that he will go blind within a year and unable to face total reliance on others, he drowns himself. Gale couples Leda's metaphorical withering upon giving up Barnaby with the grandfather's literal self-murder when his hopes for a cure are dashed. Leda's identification with the grandfather culminates in her fleeting self-recognition: "By the sense of death, of being, she was devastated. Life opened its garment, showing her cadaver, skeleton, dust" (205; emphasis added). This identification of being with death emerges as Leda's authentic new technique; her life in suspension without Barnaby, Leda submits to the level of vulnerability over which Grandfather Crumb chose death.

Faint Perfume concludes where it began, in numbness, an insensibility to the pain of growth, struggle, and self-realization from which its protagonist withdraws. Throughout her life Zona Gale remained fiercely committed to progressive politics, for which she fought on local as much as national and international levels, and Williams argues rightly that that commitment demonstrates the author's degree of social engagement (176). Gale's political activism informed her fiction as she sought "to realize angels in the commonplace . . . [to] clarify the beauty of much that we are accustomed to pass by" ("Beauty" 172). Indeed, her later fiction articulates a new aesthetic of alienation and loss, one located less in the existential nature of those conditions than in their personal and social impact. Faint Perfume exposes the stark realities behind the New Woman ideal. Leda's story, obscured as much by the noisy Crumb household as by the stock romance narrative she herself imposes, suggests an anxiety with New Woman representations. This anxiety may not have played well in 1920s Greenwich Village, but it speaks to a feminism—indeed, to the humanism for which Gale argued so passionately in her Friendship Village stories—beyond the narrow class, geographic, and ethnic boundaries against which the New Woman railed at the same time as she enjoyed their privileges. How tenuous was Leda's freedom if a spasmodic arm could wipe it out?

What is the value of an independence that ache can erase? How financially vulnerable is an artist, particularly a woman artist without a father, husband, or trust fund, and what other creative, political, psychological, and sexual vulnerabilities might that financial insecurity produce? Leda's refusal to sentimentalize her condition and Gale's rejection of the cult of invalidism paradigm suggest the deliberate, self-conscious decension of language that precedes a new, feminist language of female powerlessness whose refusal to define itself as such constitutes its resistance. By mortifying Leda's flesh and the narrative bones of collapse, renewal, and resurrection, Gale makes legible the howling cry within the hiding self.

Notes

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1. Gale's last novel, Magna, was published in 1939, the year after her death.

2. I borrow here from Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's description of the "morbid cult of hypochondria—'female invalidism'—that began in the late nineteenth century and did not completely fade until the late 1910s" (17). In further discussions of invalidism, I want to stress, however, the power dynamic implicit in the term "invalidism," the extent to which any examination of female invalidism foregrounds the "ill woman's relation to power and her culture" (Price Herndl 213).

3. Gale infuses Leda and Barnaby's romance with the mysticism that characterizes her later fiction, notably Birth, Borgia, and Preface to a Life; this spiritual dimension tempers the harsh realism of Gale's post-Friendship Village work. For a thorough discussion of Gale's mysticism, see Derleth 191–198.

4. For examples of this paradigm, see Yezierska and Fauset, whose protagonists' artistic, independent identities are strengthened by their intimate partnerships.

5. Elaine Scarry analyzes the articulation of pain as the birth of a new language: "To witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to a pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language; but, conversely, to be present when a person moves up
and out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself" (6).

Works Cited


"Gym class." For many Americans – young and old, male and female – that phrase evokes images of dodge ball, sit-ups, social dance, and, of course, the gym teacher. That everyone's memories are so vivid speaks to the resonance of physical education in our lives, and in American culture generally. Since the profession's development in the 1880s, physical educators have played a significant role in shaping how Americans define and pursue "fitness." For decades--in the gym, on the playing field, and in the locker room, ordinary Americans have learned indelible lessons about their bodies--about their physical assets, potential, and limits.

Of equal importance has been the profession's "hidden curriculum"--its implicit training in personal values and social interaction. In subtle and overt ways, physical education teaches us about discipline and spontaneity, cooperation and competition, self-esteem and embarrassment. Thus, the overall power of physical education is considerable: through recreation, we learn to re-create both our bodies and our selves. [End Page 273]

The lessons of physical education are so compelling precisely because they are located in the body. 1 There is nothing abstract or ambiguous about gym class; the meaning of any activity is concrete, immediate, and clear. Fitness tests, for instance, require schoolchildren to undertake discrete physical tasks; the results reveal--to teachers and pupils alike--which boys and girls have "normal" and which have "substandard" levels of skill. In equally tangible ways, supervised exercise, competitive games, and other activities in physical education also develop and measure the body's ability to "perform."

How do teachers explain their systems for training and evaluating the body? What intellectual assumptions underlie programs in physical education? For more than a century, physical educators in America have rationalized their practices of the body through theories about human movement and health. The fields of anatomy, physiology, and biomechanics, in particular, have long supplied physical educators with data and concepts that seemed especially relevant and authoritative. In the early 1900s, anthropometry and structural models of the body were popular. In later decades, more dynamic paradigms, such as kinesiology, began to dominate the field. 2 Together, the practices and theories of physical education create an aura of scientific objectivity. The discipline's curricula and principles, though, are not neutral. Physical education often reproduces social relations and ideologies; for example, the field inscribes the body with cultural definitions of race, class, and sex.

The gendering of the body occurs at both a material and a conceptual level. Through sex-coded activities, physical education marks and patrols the border between "masculinity" and "femininity." 3 Boys play football, while girls learn rhythmic gymnastics; schoolboys perform "regular" push-ups as measures of strength, while girls do "modified" push-ups. Similarly, many theories in physical education treat gender as a critical variable in motor development and ability. Contemporary biomechanics, for example, has an androcentric bias; its definitions of "skillful movement" favor the experiences and performance of men over those of women. 4

The primary and most durable concept by which physical education has gendered the body is the science of sex differences. Amidst the changing foci, even fashions, of the discipline, the principle of sexual dualism has been notably constant. 5 From the late nineteenth century to the present, physical educators have regarded the structure, motions, and abilities of males and females as being markedly and, in many respects, innately different; further, they have claimed that the social and psychological nature of physical activity varies by sex--that is, that
males and females have distinct motives and behaviors when they play. To understand the construction and meaning of gendered bodies in physical education, then, scholars would do well to start with the notion of sex differences, because physical educators themselves began there.

This paper examines the science of sex differences in American physical education between 1900 and 1940, the period during which the ideas and institutions of the profession solidified. It focuses on the views of white, middle-class women who taught physical education at schools, YWCAs, and colleges and universities (both coed and single-sex) during the first half of the twentieth century. How did women teachers—as the primary supervisors of female recreation—conceptualize or "re-create" the gendered body? As we shall see, teachers' arguments about sex differences were complex, even convoluted. Female physical educators both accentuated and minimized women's distinctiveness; they at once disparaged and rehabilitated "female" traits; they attributed sex differences to both nature and nurture, both biology and custom. By balancing every conclusion about sexual dualism with its opposite, women teachers avoided simplistic views and, invariably, found a middle ground on questions about female physicality and character.

Why did teachers construct a model of "womanhood" that was so elaborate and cautious? I will show that multiple, often conflicting forces steered female physical educators toward highly nuanced conclusions about the extent and origins of sex differences. Their experiences as white, middle-class females, the demands of professionalization, and their varied objectives for themselves and their students all influenced how they conceptualized women's bodies and "nature." Only a flexible, even ambiguous, interpretation of sex differences could accommodate the teachers' diverse, and overlapping, concerns.

The history of sexual science and the history of physical education both bear upon the social construction of the body, but until now the two fields have been isolated from each other. By studying physical education, however, scholars can gain new insights into the history of sexual science in America. An examination of physical education demonstrates that people follow circuitous, not linear, paths when analyzing "womanhood," and that many forces—intellectual, professional, and social—affect their conclusions along the way. Conversely, by focusing on the science of sex differences we can begin to recast the historiography of women's physical education. In recent years, both historians and physical educators have examined the development of female physical education in twentieth-century America. They have concentrated on two features of the field: female teachers' distinctive philosophy of recreation, and the structural separation of men's and women's programs.

Many early female physical educators championed a special vision of exercise and sports. In stark contrast to the ethos of men's athletics, many women teachers—both prominent and rank-and-file—stressed mass participation, rather than elite sports; play for play's sake, instead of victory at any price; personal growth and safety, not exploitation and commercialization. During the first half of the twentieth century, many female teachers opposed high-level competition for women, including intercollegiate sports and the Olympics, and devised special games (such as limited-dribble, divided-court basketball) to protect health and femininity. Leading female physical educators, in particular, advanced this philosophy aggressively, but with uneven success, in schools, colleges, YWCAs, and other settings around the country.

To effect their model of female recreation, women teachers needed a gym of their own. In their view, philosophical integrity required structural autonomy. Females should teach other females, they explained, while males trained males; women ought to exercise and play together, just as men should compete against other men; control over female physical education should rest with women teachers, while their
male colleagues administered men's programs. In many respects, those tenets became reality. Whereas other areas of American life and education became more integrated during the twentieth century, physical education remained, until only recently, bifurcated by sex.

Why did early white female teachers adopt these particular beliefs and strategies? What did sex-based recreation and governance mean to them? Historians and physical educators have formulated two explanations. The first model might be called "accommodationism." As the name suggests, this analysis focuses on physical educators' conformity to traditional norms of gender, as expressed by medical experts and popular culture. According to the accommodationism theory, women teachers justified female-specific programs of moderate exercise by emphasizing the instability of women's bodies and minds; in other words, teachers conceded that female "nature" was impaired, with physical and mental powers quite unlike, even inferior to, those of men.

The teachers' conservatism was well represented in the writings of Mabel Lee--a professor of physical education at the University of Nebraska from 1924 to 1952, and the first female president of the profession's national organization. Males and females, Lee observed, differ "physiologically, psychically and socially." 9 By necessity, she claimed, female recreation must be both separate and unique:

Because of the particular physical conformation and emotional makeup of girls let us promote for them an athletic program free from emotionalism, free from intense competition, free from heart and pelvic strain, free from all attempts to imitate the boys. . . . Let us build for [girls] a sports realm of their own, . . . founded on physical safeguards and moderation. 10

Why did Lee and her colleagues view women's "nature" as peculiar, even handicapped? The "accommodationism" model posits that white female physical educators adhered to prevailing gender ideologies because of [End Page 278] their background (as middle-class women) and status (as members of a new profession seeking academic and social acceptance).

Whereas accommodationism emphasizes the conservatism of early women's physical education, the second perspective--"radicalism"--focuses on the field's more progressive features. For some scholars, the most important contribution of early leaders in women's physical education was their sharp critique of competition, individualism, and other prototypic male values. Rejecting the male model of recreation and sports, the argument runs, many women teachers celebrated such female qualities as inclusiveness and cooperation. They created a separate sphere in which female culture and self-determination could flourish. For some historians, the apparently radical premises of women's physical education in the first half of the twentieth century resemble, in an appealing way, certain forms of present-day feminism: scholars liken teachers' valorization of essential female values to cultural feminism, and their commitment to separatist structures as a foreshadowing of radical feminism.

Though divergent, the two analyses – "accommodationism" and "radicalism" – do intersect. Some scholars depict women's physical education as both conservative and progressive. Conventional attitudes about "womanhood," they posit, served to legitimate sex-segregated programs and to affirm "female" values. Whether women teachers calculated its effects or not, conformity bought them independence. 11

Accommodationism and radicalism are informative accounts of the philosophy and strategies in early women's physical education. Both, however, oversimplify the historical record. First, they tend to collapse the views of female physical educators during the early twentieth century into neat, uniform categories – whereas the teachers' ideas were diverse and nuanced. Second, accommodationism and radicalism are rather linear explanations: they suggest that one or more variables--for instance, sex or class – predetermined female teachers' agendas and
attitudes, especially their ideas about "femininity." Such analyses conceal the intricate processes by which physical educators formed their views about female health and recreation.

One means of addressing the shortcomings of accommodationism and radicalism as historical models is to explore the scientific premises of physical education. Clearly, the philosophies and structure of women's physical education were grounded in the theory of sexual dualism. By studying how women physical educators conceptualized sex differences and the female body, we can uncover the complexity of their attitudes about gender and health as well as the indirect routes by which they reached those conclusions. Therefore, after reviewing general trends in sexual science during the early twentieth century, I shall summarize how white female physical educators perceived sex differences—in physical bodies, and in human temperament and behavior. I shall then examine the multiple forces—intellectual, cultural, and professional—that guided teachers toward complex, rather than simple, views about female physicality and character.

Trends in Sexual Science

Female physical educators in the early 1900s discussed women's "nature"—its biological, psychological, and social features—in professional and popular literature. They considered what types of sex differences existed, and how small or pronounced they were; they asked about the origins of sex differences, and what implications those held for female exercise and sports; they reflected on the extent to which sex differences could (and should) be maintained or modified. Their ideas were part of a larger discussion about "womanhood" in America at this time. [End Page 280]

Sexual science and the corresponding nature-nurture debate underwent significant changes during the early decades of the twentieth century. In the life sciences, biological explanations of human "nature" prevailed. The acceptance of Darwin's theory of evolution, the waning of neo-Lamarckism, and discoveries in genetics and biochemistry enabled biological determinism to expand and harden as a scientific paradigm. In the process, biomedical models of sex differences also sharpened. Since at least the mid-eighteenth century, physicians, physiologists, and others had argued that women were not merely imperfect versions of "maleness," but were fundamentally different from men. Convinced that sexual dualism marked every feature of the human body, they attempted to discover the physical site or "essence" of womanhood. In the early twentieth century, for instance, geneticists and endocrinologists, respectively, located "femaleness" in the sex chromosomes and in hormones; their interpretations both built upon and reinforced the premises of sexual dualism and biological determinism.

Simultaneously, experiments and theories in the social sciences advanced a radically different perspective on human development. Between the 1890s and 1920s, a new cohort of American psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists (including many women) challenged virtually every tenet of sexual science and biological reductionism. First, they demonstrated that sex differences in personality, intelligence, and other traits were minimal; men and women, they concluded, were far more alike than they were dissimilar. Second, social scientists argued that human character and behavior were not biologically determined (and thus fixed), but derived from social and historical circumstance, and thus were fluid. While biomedicine accentuated sex differences and located them in the body, social science minimized sexual dualism and attributed human development to cultural forces. [End Page 281]

To represent biological determinism and environmentalism as completely separate models, though, would be misleading. Although most researchers in biology and social science during the early 1900s clearly emphasized either nature or nurture, few completely excluded the alternate explanation. Staunch environmentalists acknowledged that biology influenced, even governed, certain human traits; likewise, many bio-reductionists ceded some ground to social interpretations of
behavior. In the early twentieth century, then, the nature-nurture debate presented scientists, and other Americans, with a spectrum of ideas about human biology and behavior, including the character of "male" and "female."

Between 1900 and 1940, white female physical educators in America puzzled over the same issues as did natural and social scientists. Were the two sexes different or alike? Did nature or nurture make them that way? In many respects, teachers' commentaries on sex differences – their questions, language, information, and uncertainties – resembled those expressed by professionals in other fields. Few physical educators, however, noted those parallel discussions or referred directly to research in relevant fields. The physical education literature about sex differences was rich in detail and conclusions, confident in tone, but weak in documentation. Female teachers provided innumerable facts and examples, along with strong assertions about the origins and meaning of "womanhood." In general, though, they did not carefully substantiate their data or conclusions by citing experts outside of physical education. Nor did the majority of female physical educators in this period conduct original experiments in such areas as the mechanics and physiology of exercise, or the psychology of play. [End Page 282]

These patterns are curious. As noted earlier, American physical educators sought scientific authority for their practices and theories. Why, then, did women teachers rarely cite specific research about sex differences, much less conduct their own studies? Some reasons are straightforward. In all likelihood, most physical educators were not well versed in either biomedical discoveries or the intellectual turmoil in social science. Moreover, few physical educators – male or female – undertook independent research of any kind during the early twentieth century. And the omission of hard proof also gave women teachers a discursive advantage. Their complicated views about sex differences required conceptual ambiguity and elastic, even contradictory, evidence. Unencumbered by documentation, women physical educators gained flexibility; they could move more easily through their elaborate arguments. Ironically, that style also made them sound more authoritative; without detailed references, the teachers' information and conclusions probably struck readers as being self-evident.

The Female Body

What arguments about sex differences did women physical educators construct? Not surprisingly, they began their discussions by considering the human body, its physical form and function. They were struck by the anatomical differences between the sexes, and, with few exceptions, they concluded that most such characteristics disadvantaged women when compared to men. They cited many structural features that, in their view, handicapped women and even exposed them to injury: a female's oblique pelvis made running difficult; her small hands, narrow shoulders, and limited musculature made certain basketball shots and baseball throws impossible; inadequate strength and a low center of gravity precluded various track and field events. Only rarely did female anatomy seem advantageous. As Dorothy Sumption of Ohio State noted, women's delicate structure was well suited for activities requiring "technique and fine coordination," rather than "strength and endurance." In fact, another teacher claimed, women's lack of power prevented some sports from being harmful to them. Physiological differences seemed equally important to physical educators: because of small hearts, low hemoglobin levels, and limited lung capacity, they said, women had poor stamina and were prone to fatigue.

To validate their examples and conclusions, women teachers could have drawn upon an extensive scientific literature about physical sex differences. Between 1900 and 1940, researchers conducted comparative studies on anthropometric measurements, vital capacity, metabolism, and strength, as well as numerous experiments on the effects of exercise on blood pressure, heart rate, respiration, and gastric activity in one or both sexes. Such work not only appeared in medical and physiological journals but was, on occasion, available to physical...
educators in their own professional literature. Some studies seemed to demonstrate women's physical "liabilities," while others minimized sex differences and women's risks during exercise. In short, there was ample and varied grist for physical educators' mill. Although some female teachers cited laboratory studies, the majority chose a simpler path: without offering proof or references, most depicted women as physically distinctive, even disadvantaged. 25

On the topic of menstruation, however, women teachers followed current research far more diligently. Invariably, they identified menstruation (and reproduction in general) as the critical sex difference. None doubted that strenuous exercise during menstruation was dangerous or, conversely, that menstruation limited a woman's vigor and performance. At issue was the level of risk and handicap. 26 Justifiably, women physical educators contended that science had not yet resolved the matter. During [End Page 285] the early 1900s, literature about the relationship between exercise and menstruation accumulated rapidly in both the United States and Europe. Strong assertions were made on both sides; every extravagant account of dysfunction (including sterility) due to exercise was countered by equally vigorous claims that activity during menstruation was safe, even therapeutic. To a greater or lesser extent, the teachers were aware of current research, often citing it in their own writings. Confronted with ambiguous information, they chose a policy of prudence: girls might rest or exercise moderately during the early days of their periods, but should avoid strenuous activity and competition. 27

Overall, the import of physical differences seemed clear: the two sexes were bipolar in form and aptitude. As Mabel Lee of the University of Nebraska concluded in 1933, "Physically women are not adapted by anatomical structure or physiological function to the intense forms of muscular activity and strain which are fundamental and normal in athletics as developed and carried on for boys and men." 28 Few, if any, colleagues disputed those generalizations; they, too, described men's and women's bodies in oppositional terms.

Was their construction of the female body also negative? Sexual dualism does not inherently devalue women: women's unique constitution can be regarded as superior to men's, or at least complementary. No white female physical educator took the former position; many toyed with the second. Perhaps, as Helen McKinstry of the Pratt Institute suggested, "Woman is not undevelop man, but diverse" 29 --that is, women's physical nature is different from, not necessarily inferior to, men's.

Having contrasted male and female biology, often unfavorably, many women physical educators set out to rehabilitate the female body. They suggested that sex differences did not make fitness a man's special birthright, condemning women to lives of physical restriction and ill-health. The lethargic girls and fragile adults that one encountered in the [End Page 286] gym, teachers reminded each other, did not represent the upper limit of female vigor. We should not underestimate the physical capacity of young girls, some insisted, nor coddle college students with light exercise. 30 At every age, a woman could be energetic, graceful, and fit.

The task of renovating women's bodies was especially urgent and difficult in the area of sports. After all, female physical educators had conceded that women seemed physically ill equipped for athletics, the prototypic and much-celebrated domain of men. To find value in women's athletic skills, it was necessary to measure them with a yardstick other than male performance. Although the female body was not built for "speed, strength and endurance," observed Agnes R. Wayman of Barnard College, it was suited for activities that required "neuromuscular skill, form and control." 31 By extension, women's sports were not pale copies of men's, as so many critics complained, but were interesting and challenging in their own right. Women's basketball, for instance, was "not a modified, expurgated, imitation" of men's basketball, Helen McKinstry insisted, "but a different game," which "demands less endurance, but greater agility and speed, and puts a premium on strategy rather than on force." 32 Such arguments tempered an otherwise hierarchical system of sexual dualism. Having disparaged
the female body, physical educators then defended its unique structure and capacities.

The muting of sexual polarity is also evident in teachers' analyses of causation. Do physical sex differences, they asked, arise from biological or social forces? The same question engaged many biomedical and social scientists as the nature-nurture debate boiled in the early twentieth century. When physical traits were at issue, biological researchers had no doubt about the primacy of nature; most social scientists, even fervent environmentalists, accepted the biological origins of physical differences between individuals (though not between groups). By contrast, women physical educators developed a symmetrical model: biology and custom, they asserted, contributed in equal measure to the physical differences between men and women.

They offered numerous examples. Helen W. Hazelton, for example, asked an age-old question: What accounts for the "notorious fact that girls are poorer throwers and catchers [of a baseball] than boys"? 33 "While there may be some slight structural handicaps," she concluded, "it is undoubtedly true that probably 75 per cent of the difference is due to lack of practice." 34 Girls should not play basketball by boys' rules, argued Helen Smith of Cincinnati, because their "organs are more delicately balanced and more easily displaced, the nervous system is more unstable, endurance and vitality is less"—but this is not simply the biological legacy of "primitive woman and the labor and task of her period. Too many centuries of being held down by conventions and customs have intervened, too many centuries of physical inactivity." 35 Alice W. Frymir, too, invoked both nature and nurture to explain girls' poor stamina. On the one hand, a girl's lung capacity and hemoglobin count do not match a boy's; male physique and energy, however, have been "built up through generations of physical activity." 36 With more opportunities, Frymir concluded, girls might develop comparable stamina and be able to run long, not merely short, distances.

Many colleagues agreed that tradition had impaired women's abilities and, by corollary, that more experience would improve female skill and performance. Although women will never be able to compete with men, Hazel H. Pratt of the University of Kansas acknowledged in 1919, "during the past forty years, increased exercise and outdoor life to which women have been admitted have added to their weight, height, lung capacity and physical vigor." 37 Within the limits prescribed by nature, women could develop health and skill.

By casting biology and custom as equal partners in women's physical development, most white female teachers avoided extreme positions in the nature-nurture controversy. That sense of caution typified their overall assessment of physical sex differences: they both highlighted and softened the import of women's unique physical features; they conceded that men could outperform women, but defended the worth of female abilities and games; while acknowledging that nature restricted women's development, they also exposed the stifling effects of culture on female exercise and health. At every juncture, then, most women physical educators took the path of nuance, not simplicity, when discussing physical sex differences. [End Page 288]

### Female Character and Behavior

Having covered biological features, women teachers undertook a similar analysis of psychology and behavior. In what respects were male and female personalities alike or different? Between 1900 and 1940, that question engaged many biological and social scientists. 38 In general, women physical educators did not rely, explicitly, on current studies from other fields; nor did they (or their male colleagues) conduct much original research on the psychosocial dimension of physical activity, despite the growing prominence of that theme in physical education by the 1920s. 39 Nevertheless, their analyses paralleled trends in sexual science during the early twentieth century. In particular, their conclusions echoed those of America's new generation of social scientists; as did newly trained psychologists and sociologists, most female physical educators attributed behavioral differences to
environmental forces and insisted that the two sexes shared many needs and interests.

First, female teachers considered the type and extent of sex differences in personality. Some of them regarded the personal natures of men and women as polar opposites; others claimed that the development and psychologies of the two sexes were virtually identical. Most, however, concluded that the characters of males and females were both different and similar.

On the one hand, physical educators emphasized girls' and women's distinctive qualities. Many descriptions were highly unflattering. Young girls, for instance, seemed nervous, selfish, unrealistic, impulsive, shallow, and sensitive. According to Blanche Trilling of the University of Wisconsin, girls are "habitually more excitable, more sensitive to opinion and more likely to give expression to emotional upsets than boys are...[A girl] is overjoyed when praised and correspondingly cast down when..." 41 Unlike males, females lacked a sense of cooperation, fairness, sound judgment, and focus. Frances A. Kellor illustrated the latter problem: "When the girls first begin their work in sports," she observed in 1906, "...they play 'as though they had no heads on.'" 42 She offered an example:

One day last summer, while working with a squad of green base-ball players...one of them made a splendid hit, good for at least three bases. She ran to first and when she was nearly to second came back to first. In desperation and amazement I rushed to first and asked the reason. "Oh," was the reply, "I noticed the first baseman was a friend of mine, and I came back to tell her something." 43

At the same time, certain traits and needs were common to both sexes. Humans "are endowed at birth with many instincts," observed Florence D. Alden, including "[r]ivalry, desire to win the approval of others, love of being with others, pleasure in putting things through ('being a cause') and particularly in accomplishing this in co-operation with others, and joy in physical and mental activity in and of itself." 44 In modern times, women, not only men, should learn teamwork, honesty, loyalty, self-control, and decision-making – what Lois Pedersen Broady called "training in character and citizenship." 45

What produced women's qualities, whether sex-specific or universal? A few white female physical educators were staunch biological determinists, who attributed women's character to evolutionary biology and endocrinology. Others cited both nature and nurture to explain sex differences in personality and interests. Beulah Kennard, for instance, concluded that girls' artistic bent was innate, while their passivity and immaturity were acquired. For the majority, however, women's behavior owed little to biology. In large measure, they said, female traits were "the result of tradition and education." 48 For centuries, men have "experienced competitive and cooperative activities in the hunt, in tribal life, in war, and later in our industrial system." 49

Those historically male behaviors were also the requisite and result of athletic success. Thus, expecting girls to be ready "emotionally and intellectually" for sports, observed Florence Alden, is like asking a child unfamiliar with fractions to do calculus. On the other hand, provide girls and women with proper encouragement and experiences, and they will become team players, good sports, and responsible individuals. Kathryn E. Darnell, for instance, a high-school basketball coach, enjoyed watching her "awkward...girls grow into skillful players, lethargic minds become active and resourceful; explosive temperaments brought under self-control; sulking girls learning to submit cheerfully, and all players learning the lesson of harmonious co-operation." 52

How could physical education serve that goal? Logically, discussions about sex differences--physical and behavioral – converged on that important question. What program of exercise and games best suited the body and character of the average American female? Between 1900 and 1940, the answers were quite uniform. Whatever their disagreements on
theoretical issues, many white female physical educators in America concurred about the purpose and philosophy of their field.

First and foremost, they agreed that physical education had to respect the female body and character. According to Agnes R. Wayman, women's physical education "should be based upon sound educational psychology as well as upon sound physiological, anatomical and biological principles. It should be based upon the needs of the girl and the woman. It should be governed by the fact that every girl is a potential mother, that every girl is a future citizen." 53 An effective program of female physical education, then, would respect the avenues that nature itself opened up or closed off for women's fitness, without jeopardizing their physical health or social roles. At the same time, physical educators wanted to cultivate new skills and attributes in women, thereby mitigating the physical limitations and undoing the social constraints that historically impeded female development. An ideal program, they concluded, would encourage "form and skill," rather than "great strength and speed"; 54 physical activity, not athletic expertise; personal growth and lifelong habits, rather than petty concerns or short-term rewards.

During the first half of the twentieth century, many white female teachers worked vigorously to translate this philosophy into reality. They actively opposed elite competition, as represented by the Olympics and interscholastic and intercollegiate varsity sports. They popularized (even mandated) games that, in their view, encouraged fitness and avoided physical and emotional excess. They endorsed mass participation and fun, as exemplified by intramural sports and Play Days for high school and college women. With a certain degree of success, they advocated wholesome, democratic recreation as the best route to healthy womanhood. 55 [End Page 292]

"Accommodationism" and "radicalism" have two shortcomings as historical analyses of women's physical education in the early 1900s. First, they imply that female teachers viewed the gendered body in simple, uniform terms. Second, they suggest that the women's ideas were the linear result of a limited set of factors. However, neither the teachers' views nor the process by which they reached their conclusions were uncomplicated. The strengths and inadequacies of accommodationism and radicalism become more evident when the two models are examined in detail; in the process, the following discussion also sketches a more nuanced and dynamic analysis of women's physical education in early twentieth-century America.

Accommodationism

Accommodationism suggests that female physical educators adopted conventional views about gender and physicality due to their status as white, middle-class women in a young profession. 56 Raised in the white, middle-class culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most were predisposed to accept traditional notions about women's nature and roles; in many respects, they were comfortable with dominant assumptions about "femininity." To be sure, their ideal female was traditional: she was selfless, cooperative, and controlled. The athletic girl was not "loud and boisterous, with a tendency toward masculinity in dress as well as in speech and in general conduct," wrote Agnes Wayman of Barnard, but a "strong, healthy, normal girl...a little saner, a little better balanced, and a little more capable of taking her place in life because of the training which she has received on the field or in the gymnasium." 57 Whether domestic or public, that "place in life" was, unquestionably, nurturing and heterosexual. Who would suggest, asked Helen McKinstry, "that the delicate, anaemic, hothouse plant type of girl, afraid of sun, wind and rain, timid, nervous and clinging, even though she have most womanly attributes, will make a better teacher, wife or mother than the strong, full-blooded, physically courageous woman, a companion for her husband on the golf links and a playmate with her children?" 58 [End Page 293]
The professional status of these educators also depended, in part, on adherence to white, middle-class values. In the early 1900s, physical education was a relatively new discipline in search of an institutional base and social acceptance; adopting conventional views about gender eased the process of professionalization. Conformity was especially important, even obligatory, for women in the field. By both preaching and practicing normative femininity, women physical educators could avoid accusations of "mannishness" and "deviance." Such stigmas were a potent force in early American physical education, and remain so today; for decades, the assumed connection between sports and lesbianism has affected all female athletes and physical educators, whatever their sexual orientation.

Yet when we examine teachers' ideas about the extent and origins of sexual dualities, we find that the variables of sex, race, class, and professionalization shaped American physical education in more intricate ways than the accommodationism model reveals. Women physical educators were pulled both toward and away from simple, conformist views; their perceptions of sex differences were at once conventional and unconventional.

First, female teachers could neither deny nor magnify the reality of sex differences. Denial would violate a basic premise of white, middle-class culture, namely, that men and women were fundamentally different; ignoring, or even minimizing, gender boundaries would jeopardize the field's social and professional standing, and elicit homophobic stigmas. Moreover, the principle of sex differences was essential to separatism and self-governance. The value, the necessity of programs run by and for women seemed self-evident; no professional leader – male or female – doubted that the field should be bifurcated by sex. Still, women's claim over female fitness was a bold one. For decades male physicians and scientists had defined female nature, using the theory of sex differences as an especially powerful ideology of subordination. Ironically, the concept of sex differences allowed female professionals, among them physical educators and physicians, to demarcate realms in which women's expertise seemed essential. In the locker room and gym, teachers argued, only a woman could properly supervise girls, advise them about hygiene and menstruation, and understand their special needs. Citing the peculiarities of womanhood, female physical educators reappropriated the female body, in symbolic and literal terms.

At the same time, they could not afford to overstate sex differences. If the sexes were completely dissimilar, then skills and attributes typically ascribed to men would be virtually closed to women; polarizing the sexes precluded any chance of enlarging women's lives. Despite adhering to many old-fashioned ideas about gender, most female physical educators hoped to expand the qualities and activities deemed appropriate for women--and that goal required a softening of sexual dualism. Two examples may illustrate the point.

First, women teachers were uneasy about lingering assumptions of female frailty. To be sure, some had experienced sickly childhoods, and most described women's physical abilities in unflattering terms. Their own lives, however, often refuted the notion of female delicacy: as youngsters, many had enjoyed the freedom of spirited play; as professional physical educators, they had chosen lives of activity and fitness, and some of them, including national leaders, even participated in competitive amateur sports during their teaching careers. Although most physical educators did not extend similar opportunities to their students, they fully expected all females to be active and fit. An ideal girl or woman was vigorous, alert, confident, resolute, responsible, and resilient – human traits expressed in female ways. Moreover, as women and professionals in a male-dominated world, female teachers became convinced that teamwork, decision-making, and perseverance were as necessary (and natural) for women as for men.

The teachers' model of healthy, active womanhood both drew upon and contributed to a reimaging of "femaleness" within white, middle-class culture during the 1910s and 1920s. The "New Woman," as the icon was known, was vibrant, wholesome, and confident – the very qualities that
physical educators were determined to promote. Thus, without shedding the late-Victorian assumptions about gender that had prevailed during their youth and training, many women teachers cautiously explored new ideas about what the female body could do and what female character might entail. Although the "New Woman" they envisioned was decidedly feminine and heterosexual, she also expressed qualities once considered exclusively "male." For women to be energetic and capable (even in a limited sense), they had to resemble—not diverge from—men. To advance such an ideal, the teachers had to downplay sex differences, while stressing traits that both men and women could (and should) develop.

A second concern that led female physical educators to deemphasize sex differences had to do with instructional resources. Whether working in schools or other settings, most white female teachers were painfully aware of the superior facilities and equipment that their male colleagues enjoyed. Without calling such inequities "discrimination," they were impatient with their subordinate status and unnecessary hardships; while sustaining their instructional programs by creative means, they also worked for equity, for fair opportunities and resources in women's physical development.

At times, women teachers based their argument for justice in the gym on female distinctiveness. Proper recreation, they noted, would protect and improve women's reproductive capacity. On the other hand, female physical educators also justified equity on the grounds of "sameness": girls and women deserved fair treatment because their recreational needs and rights were comparable to those of boys and men. As Ethel Perrin, a physical educator associated with the American Child Health Association, complained, "the world of recreation is a boy's world." 63 Perrin's examples of male privilege at schools were familiar to most women teachers: "While the boys had the open school yard," she observed, "the girls were forced to play baseball indoors in the gymnasium. And more often than not, after a short play period in the gymnasium, a whistle would blow signalling the girls to clear the floor so that the boys' basket ball team could get in their daily practice." 64 Perrin called on schools to "REMEMBER THE GIRLS!" by providing them with "the same opportunities for physical exercise as are afforded boys." 65 Girls and women were entitled to comparable resources and supervision because recreation was equally important for both sexes.

Two goals—the development of active femininity, through equitable recreation—led women physical educators to downplay sexual dualism. By identifying features that both sexes shared, white female teachers could promote physical activities and social skills that had once seemed inadvisable, if not impossible, for girls and women. They could offer active exercise and games, not merely gentle pastimes. They could insist that girls and women have fair opportunities to play, rather than inferior facilities and secondhand equipment. The proposition that the sexes were similar enabled these educators to put women's needs and interests on an equal footing with those of men, in a world that favored the latter.

In short, female physical educators sought both separatism and equality. Committed to self-determination, they also wanted fair treatment for themselves and their students. Autonomy seemed to be predicated on sexual dichotomies, while equity required sexual convergence. Balancing those two goals, most women physical educators concluded that the two sexes were both different and alike.

Such apparently contradictory ideas about sexual dualism were common among women professionals and reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the mid-1800s, for instance, American suffragists had sought women's enfranchisement on the grounds of both justice and expediency: on the one hand, women were entitled to vote as a matter of equal rights; on the other hand, the introduction of women's special qualities would improve the democratic process. 66 Likewise, female physicians, scientists, and civic reformers in the early 1900s argued that both women's similarities to and their differences from men justified their participation in public life. 67 The "equal, but different"
argument did not stem from any confusion or indecision on women's part; instead, it represented a viable, even logical, position for female professionals and reformers in American society at the turn of the century. The same can be said of women physical educators: they advanced professional equity and self-governance by neither exaggerating nor disregarding sex differences.

The question of sexual dualism remains a critical and problematic one in feminist theory today. No idea, one scholar recently declared, "has been more contradictory, polemical, and important" than the notion of "difference." Many feminist theorists and activists are still caught on the horns of "the difference dilemma" – trapped between the equally risky choices of emphasizing or ignoring sex differences. In a society that privileges men, both positions can render women even more inconsequential: women can be marginalized either due to their peculiar (that is, inferior) nature, or because their needs match (that is, are absorbed by) those of men. How, then, does one acknowledge difference, while pursuing equity? That conundrum – in areas as diverse as medical care, employment policies, and physical education – remains as perplexing and important today as it was at the turn of the century. In the early 1900s, female physical educators resolved the matter by concluding that men and women were both similar and different—a nuanced perspective that gave them flexibility: they could both support and contest white, middle-class assumptions about female life, while working for self-governance and equity in women's recreation. In ways that the accommodationism model conceals, multiple factors brought teachers to ambiguous, not clear-cut, ideas about the extent of sex differences.

The inadequacies of accommodationism are also apparent when one analyzes teachers' views about the origins of female physicality and character. Accommodationism argues, in part, that professional interests shaped the beliefs of physical educators: eager to gain public support and professional stature, female teachers conformed to white, middle-class judgments about gender and health. That generalization, however, does not explain—in any clear way—their complex views about the origins of sex differences. As discussed above, female physical educators avoided simplistic views about the relative impact of nature and nurture. Most women teachers navigated between biological determinism and environmentalism. They acknowledged that certain innate features defined the female body and character; but they also regarded custom and experience as powerful forces – both positive and negative – in women's development.

Why did physical educators draw those conclusions about the origins of sex differences? Some clues are found in teachers' rejection of bio-reductionism and environmentalism, in their pure forms, as explanations of female physicality and behavior. If they adopted biological determinism, they would have to relinquish two important roles for their profession. First, bio-reductionism implied that women's traits, whether physical or behavioral, were not subject to change. That left physical education with little room for intervention; for a field premised on physical and personal development, not simply corrective exercise, biological determinism represented professional suicide. Second, female physical educators were averse to blaming nature and excusing society for women's apparent shortcomings. Convinced that culture had a deadening effect on female recreation and development, they hoped to expose and correct social practices that they considered backward, unfair, and unhealthy. That conviction steered them away from any extreme version of biological determinism.

At the same time, social constructionism was equally self-defeating. If a person's physical nature was defined solely by cultural and, thus, relative standards, the body was no longer an objective reality that could be measured and analyzed by concrete means; that denied physical education its much-valued status as a profession grounded in science. As a discipline that trained the body, rather than the mind, physical education did not gain respect easily during its formative decades. How rigorous or important was the field compared to academic disciplines or to health-related professions, such as medicine? Even today, physical
educators are saddled with the suspicion that they "do nothing but teach games." One means of shoring up the field's credibility was to build a strong intellectual framework, emphasizing pedagogical theories and scientific knowledge. Although the focus of physical education shifted from physical to psychosocial dimensions during the early twentieth century, the profession did not abandon its necessary commitment to scientific interpretations of the human body. For scientific credibility, the field had to accord nature some influence over female physicality and character.

Women physical educators, then, had diverse goals--from pragmatic to reformist to professional. Those multiple concerns steered them away from reductionist views about the origins of sex differences and toward more subtle conclusions. Which stance on the nature-nurture debate would best define and solidify the many functions of their discipline? Which perspective would highlight the profession's unique value and principles? By incorporating both nature and nurture, physical education could be body-centered, scientifically sound, and socially useful. The job of female physical education, teachers said, was to understand and work within the boundaries set by nature, while compensating for traditions that had restricted women's exercise and character over time. Physical education would develop women's health and character in light of both nature and culture.

In sum, "accommodationism" does not account for female physical educators' complex ideas about the extent and origins of sex differences. Varied concerns moved them both toward and away from simple, conventional models of the gendered body. The teachers' experiences as white, middle-class women and the contours of physical education as a new discipline led most of them to conclude that biological and social factors had made the sexes both different and alike.

Radicalism

Radicalism is the second major perspective that explains the philosophy and strategies of early women's physical education in America. The model emphasizes two features of the profession that contemporary scholars regard as progressive: first, women teachers' insistence on self-governance; and second, their belief in and commitment to "female" principles, as opposed to "male" values.

By highlighting the teachers' separatist agenda, radicalism resembles the accommodationism model. The two perspectives interpret separatism quite differently, however. Whereas accommodationism argues that teachers' conventional attitudes about womanhood justified sex segregation, the radicalism model connects professional autonomy to essentialist views. "Essentialism," as framed by modern scholars, asserts the existence of a distinct set of "female" virtues. Whether rooted in nature or culture, the argument runs, women's unique qualities should be affirmed, even celebrated. Applied to the history of physical education, "essentialism" suggests that female teachers created an independent realm where male values were challenged and uniquely female qualities could be fostered. [End Page 300]

To be sure, many white female physical educators criticized the masculinist character of sports. Their rhetoric, in fact, often resembled that of other women professionals and reformers in America who distanced themselves from the emergent ethos of masculinity, scientism, and technocracy during the early twentieth century. As an alternative to autocratic, male-centered athletics, women physical educators favored "democracy in recreation," 74 which allowed everyone -- regardless of sex or ability -- to learn skills and play games. The historical significance of such developments in women's physical education should not be underestimated.

Neither should we misread how white women teachers perceived their female-centered world. Most did not regard their separate gyms and playing fields as enclaves for a unique "women's culture," but as political headquarters for developing female health on their own terms. 75 As the following discussion will show, the label of "essentialism"
oversimplifies their concept of "womanhood."

For one thing, as we have already seen, women physical educators typically perceived human traits along a continuum. They regarded some qualities as sex-specific, and others as universal; "male" and "female" were, at once, oppositional, complementary, and overlapping categories. For women teachers, the core values of their programs – such as egalitarianism, cooperation, and social harmony – were desirable human characteristics, not exclusively female virtues.

Moreover, female physical educators could neither valorize nor devalue "womanhood." On the one hand, several factors deterred them from extolling an essential "female" nature. First, they shared with American culture as a whole the assumption that "maleness" was normative. That premise seemed especially compelling in the physical world: men's bodies were bigger and stronger than women's, their physical aptitude was more impressive, their sports demanded more power and speed. Nature seemed asymmetric, with men holding the advantage. Given that tacit hierarchy, female physical educators could not have celebrated women's physical nature without contesting a universal "truth." Necessarily, their occasional efforts to describe women's bodies and activities in positive terms sound – to the historian, at least – awkward and apologetic. [End Page 301] For example, their attempts to compare women's basketball favorably with the men's game seem rather defensive, given the privileged status of male sports in the early twentieth century.

Second, female teachers were not "essentialists" because they did not regard "womanhood" as a finished or perfect work. Many were ill at ease with certain qualities prescribed for or denied them as white, middle-class women. According to female physical educators, the ideal "woman" was a composite figure: she embodied morality, caring, and cooperation (defined as human ideals, not uniquely feminine principles); she displayed sound judgment, persistence, and other assets usually associated with masculinity (while remaining free of men's shortcomings); and her less desirable qualities had been corrected through supervised physical education. Such a model required that "womanhood" be both commendable and flawed, both stable and malleable. Finally, early leaders were simply too competitive, too ambitious, too autocratic to ground their entire profession in such prototypic female virtues as cooperation and selflessness.

If female physical educators were not "essentialists," neither could they hold the opposite view by completely devaluing "womanhood." Although they frequently disparaged women's behavior, they did not portray women as intrinsically flawed. To do so would marginalize, even destroy, their separate world of physical education: if female skills and attributes were unimportant, then physical education for women had no rationale and little claim to resources.

Conclusion

Multiple considerations, then, pulled women physical educators away from simple views of female physicality and toward highly nuanced ones. Their "re-creation" of the female body was both critical and reassuring. They qualified every potential they discovered in the female body, and softened every liability. They regarded the female body as disadvantaged, but still trainable; women's skills as limited, yet important; women's sports as tame compared to men's, but challenging in their own right. To female physical educators, sex differences were both enabling and disabling factors in women's lives.

Neither accommodationism nor radicalism adequately reflects that complexity. In fact, no standard label fits physical educators' views about sex differences and the gendered body. For many years, histories of sexual science tended to offer limited categories by which to understand people's ideas about gender: they classified historical figures as biological determinists or social constructionists whose ideas either denied or [End Page 302] celebrated sex differences, whose political valence was either progressive or conservative, either female-friendly or
female-adverse. That the available categories were dichotomies is striking, and ironic. After all, critiques of sexual science often reveal the pitfalls of dualistic thinking; in particular, many scholars have now deconstructed "gender" as a historically binary term. 77 By extension, many historians of sexual science now recognize the fallacy of applying typologies as rigid and bipolar as the concepts of "sex" and "gender" themselves; after all, people's attitudes about sex and gender do not necessarily fall into either/or categories.

That important lesson emerges clearly from an analysis of women's physical education. In assessing the extent, origins, and meaning of men's and women's traits, female teachers could neither overlook nor belabor sex differences; they could not attribute differences solely to biology or culture; they had to both value and criticize women's character. The history of physical education confirms that people's notions about sex and gender assume complex, not dualistic, forms.

A second insight from physical education has to do with the process by which individuals reach conclusions about sex differences. Older historical works often implied that people move along simple, linear paths when conceptualizing gender; in effect, one's position on sex differences appeared as a dependent variable governed by a clear-cut independent variable – for example, political persuasion. Presumably, conservatism steered one toward biological determinism, whereas a liberal outlook favored social constructionism. More recent work, however, suggests that people follow complicated, often circuitous routes when theorizing about gender. 78

A case in point is women physical educators. Given their sex, class, race, and profession, white, middle-class female teachers did not move inexorably toward a particular position on sex differences; rather, they maneuvered through a complicated set of conditions. As women in American culture, they had to contend with prevailing notions of physicality and gender--norms that felt both comfortable and grating. As physical educators, they had to uphold the social value and scientific authority of a new profession, while securing their exclusive claim to female health. As teachers of women, they were caught on the horns of the "difference dilemma," pursuing both autonomy and equity in a society that favored men. A simple or extreme rendering of sex differences would not accommodate such varied concerns. By adopting a nuanced theory of sex differences, white female physical educators could endorse femininity and heterosexuality, sustain the importance of their profession, justify separatism and equity, and still leave room for new ideas about womanhood and fitness.

The development of physical education offers an especially useful example of the gendered body "under construction." For historians of sexual science, the study of physical education demonstrates that concepts of gender are complex and subtle, the result of varied and interacting factors. For historians of physical education, the study of sex differences reveals new aspects of the roles that sex, class, race, and professionalization have played in the discipline's development.

In recent years, historians, sociologists, and professional physical educators have elaborated a broad critique of physical education. In particular, analyses of the field's crucial and, many would say, detrimental role in gender socialization are now quite common. Some observers advocate a new system of physical education that treats men and women equitably, while recognizing relevant sex differences. Others believe that recent changes in physical education and athletics make gender-sensitive programs a moot point--after all, girls now play ice hockey, and boys dance; in colleges and other venues, males and females now recreate and even compete with each other; across the country, men's and women's departments of physical education have "merged"; men now regularly coach female athletes, and women occasionally coach males. 79

Those dramatic developments, however, will not "neutralize" physical education and sports. In a society that still is fundamentally gendered, physical education and athletics will remain gendered as well, and the
principle of sex differences will retain its centrality in the field. What may change over time are the lessons that are imparted about body, self, and gender, and who teaches them.

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Notes

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5. For critiques of sex differences and biological determinism as organizing principles in physical education, see Lynda I. A. Birke and Gail Vines, "A Sporting Chance: The

7. Clearly, this discussion is race- and class-specific. The experiences of white, middle-class women reflected their membership in the majority culture of twentieth-century America. The views of minority female physical educators--for instance, black teachers--are not addressed here for two reasons: first, in practical terms, their ideas are more difficult to uncover; second, their views are distinctive enough to warrant a separate presentation.


12. Few scholars have considered, in depth, how women teachers conceptualized the female body in the early 1900s. One noteworthy exception is Lenskyj, Out of Bounds (n. 3). Also useful is Patricia A. Vertinsky, The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1990), which focuses on medical opinions, not those of professional physical educators.


15. See the references in n. 13.

16. Both Degler, In Search of Human Nature (n. 13), and Rosenberg, Beyond Separate Spheres (n. 13), make this point. Cravens argues that, by the 1930s, theories of evolution presented nature and nurture as "distinct but interdependent variables" (Triumph of Evolution [n. 13], p. xi; emphasis in original).

17. Exceptions will be cited in later notes.

18. The scarcity of research in physical education dismayed science-based members of the profession. In fact, a conflict over the relative importance of research versus teaching, of the laboratory versus the gym, fractured American physical education in the early twentieth century (and continues to do so today). Analyses of that rift include Roberta J. Park, "The Research Quarterly and Its Antecedents," Res. Quart. Exerc. Sport, 1980, 51: 1-22; and idem, "The Emergence of the Academic Discipline of Physical Education in the United States," in Brooks, Perspectives (n. 2), pp. 20-45. Physical educators' neglect of original research does not mean that they relinquished all claims or aspirations for their profession as a "science"; as members of a body-centered discipline, they still adopted the language, the concepts, and even the respectability of science, without actually becoming scientists. For an overview of female researchers affiliated with physical education, see Roberta J. Park, "The Contributions of Women to Exercise Science and Sports Medicine, 1870-1994," Women Sport Phys. Activ. J., 1995, 3: 41-69.


22. Helen Frost, "Soccer--Introductory," in Official Handbook of the National Committee on Women's Athletics of the American Physical Education Association, Containing the General Policies of the Committee and the Official Rules for


24. The following observations are based on my survey of nearly fifty articles about physical sex differences published in scientific journals in America and abroad between 1900 and 1940; typical sources included the American Journal of Physiology, American Journal of Physical Anthropology, Journal of the American Medical Association, and Journal of Physiology. For a contemporary and even-handed review of some of that literature, written by a male physical educator, see Roy B. Moore, "An Analytical Study of Sex Differences as They Affect the Program of Physical Education," Res. Quart., 1941, 12: 587-608.

25. Some women cited only like-minded references, or misrepresented their sources' positions; examples include Agnes R. Wayman, Education through Physical Education: Its Organization and Administration for Girls and Women, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1928), pp. 201-2; and Lee, "Fundamental Differences" (n. 10), pp. 467-68. By contrast, some female physical educators were well informed about sex-difference research, and conscientious about their sources; they included Gertrude Dudley, Alice Frymir, and Florence Somers.

26. The primary literature on menstruation and exercise is vast, and deserves a case study in its own right; see Martha H. Verbrugge, "Gym Periods and Monthly Periods: The Question of Exercise and Menstruation in American Physical Education, 1900-1940" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine, Buffalo, N.Y., May 1996). Though cautious, the attitudes of female physical educators about menstruation tended to be less extreme than those of many contemporary physicians and physiologists. Some women teachers actively demystified the monthly cycle; for example, see Helen McKinstry, "The Hygiene of Menstruation," Mary Hemenway Alumnae Assoc. Bull., 1916-17, pp. 15-27. Secondary studies include Nancy Cole Dosch, "The Sacrifice of Maidens' or Healthy Sportswomen? The Medical Debate over Women's Basketball," in Hult and Trekell, Century of Women's Basketball (n. 8), pp. 125-36; Lenskyj, Out of Bounds (n. 3), especially pp. 25-53; and Vertinsky, Eternally Wounded Woman (n. 12), pp. 39-68.


32. McKinstry, "Introduction" (n. 29), p. 4.


34. Ibid.


37. Pratt, "Women's versus Men's Basket Ball Rules" (n. 19), p. 66.

38. See n. 13.

39. Among the women who were best informed about social science research were Florence Somers of the Sargent School of Physical Education, and Gertrude Dudley...
and Frances A. Kellor of the University of Chicago (on Kellor, see n. 42 below). On the ascendance of psychosocial themes, see Park, "Physiologists, Physicians" (n. 2).


43. Kellor, "Ethical Value" (n. 42), p. 164.


49. Bowers, Recreation for Girls and Women (n. 20), p. xiii. See also Sawtelle, "Interpretation of Basket Ball Rules" (n. 36), p. 81.

50. Alden, "Basket Ball for Girls" (n. 44), p. 97.


53. Wayman, Education through Physical Education (n. 25), p. 60 (emphasis in original).
54. Ibid., p. 128.

55. For further discussion of the women's philosophy, see the references in n. 8. For evidence of the philosophy's limited success, see Hult, "Governance of Athletics" (n. 8).


59. For example, see Cahn, Coming on Strong (n. 8), pp. 23-29, 76; and Himes, Female Athlete (n. 8), p. 65.


61. See the references in n. 51.


64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., p. 241 (emphasis in original).


68. Bacchi, Same Difference (n. 66), pp. 6-28 passim, makes this vital point about American and British women.


72. For discussions related to contemporary physical education, see the references in nn. 5 and 11.

**Introduction: Strike As Drama**

Labor historians in recent years have treated strikes as relatively marginal events, preferring instead to focus the cultural worlds and day-to-day lives of working-class people. In comparison to the rich meanings and analysis these "new labor historians" have unearthed in day-to-day life, strikes seem dull events indeed, especially as described by the "old labor history" of John R. Commons and his students. I would argue, as other historians have recently suggested, that strikes are in fact central to working class history, and that by redefining strikes we will be able to make them as rich and complex as any other facet of working-class life. Although the dictionary defines a strike as "a temporary stoppage of [work] in order to bring about compliance with demands," historians can better understand a strike as a cultural act, as a drama which workers use to convey their messages to potential supporters.

The importance of adopting this cultural definition of a strike is that it enables historians to use strikes differently. While strikes-as-work-stoppage force us to dismiss strikes as dull events to be passed over in favor of more revealing passages in working-class life, a cultural definition allows us to look at the messages inherent in the strike-drama. This includes both the messages which the strikers intend to convey, and other messages which we can perceive by close examination of the strike. In this way, we can force strikes to serve as valuable sources for historical information.

Novelist Leane Zugsmith demonstrated the validity of this sort of cultural analysis in a passage from A Time To Remember, her fictionalized account of the strikes which took place at the Klein's and