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Dual Spheres or Sole Sphere? "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Awakening*'s Marital Spheres Crossover

Marriage, by definition, is a shared practice. Marriage is shared because it generally involves two parties. Outside of the definition, however, it is not shared in relation to the separation of spheres. In the latter regard, marriage typically involves a demarcation between the public and private sphere. That is, some aspects are shared in public, such as being seen together with friends, family, and activities for children. Other aspects are shared in private, such as sensitive information, health, and pecuniary matters. However, this demarcation is not always clear-cut. For example, in Charlotte Perkins Gillman's short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Kate Chopin's novel, *The Awakening*, both protagonists' husbands (John and Léonce) concern themselves with their wives' eccentric behavior in private because it has the potential to harm them in public. The protagonists (the narrator and Edna), in the end, retaliate by damaging their husbands' public image through their private actions.[1] Considering these actions, we conclude that the private and public spheres are not only inseparable; they threaten to—and quite often do—crossover.

John restricts his wife first in the private sphere so that her thoughts do not have the opportunity to materialize into the public sphere. He primarily restricts her private musings through preempting her ability to write, which preempts her ability to think and thus impedes her

[1] Given that the narrator, who is also the protagonist, is never named in "The Yellow Wallpaper," I will refer to her as "the narrator."

opportunity to undermine his public image as a certified physician. If we think of writing as invoking creativity—which opens the neural capacity to question John's authority over her condition—her writing is dangerous to him. Both doctors, he and his brother, as well as John's sister, Jennie—"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" (4)—restrict the narrator's writing owing to the danger it poses in permitting her to rebuke their injunctions only to begin acting on her own accord. In fact, John makes clear throughout that she ought to adhere strictly to him, to exhaust her capacity to think. When she notes that exhausting her capacity to think by eschewing writing makes her sleepy, John's prescription is for her to relax her mind, not to use her capacity for thought at all: "I lie down ever so much now. John says it is good for me, and to sleep all I can" (8). That John sees sleep as a favorable remedy allows us to understand why he presses her to sleep all she can. The term "sleep," by definition, means physical rest, but it can also more tellingly indicate a non-awakened or enlightened state. In the latter sense, it is John who is pressing her to stay in this state, under his wing as *his* patient who need not listen to anyone's authority but his.

While John takes measures to prevent the narrator from awakening, Léonce does not get the chance to do so with Edna. Because marriage makes it so that an action of one party inevitably carries over to the other—it is a practice of union in virtually every facet, after all—Edna's failure to receive callers on Tuesday afternoons is seen as pernicious to Léonce. When he raises this issue to Doctor Mandelet, we may note the emphasis he places on other people rather than Edna herself: "That's the trouble, broke in Mr. Pontellier, "she hasn't been associating with anyone. She has abandoned her Tuesdays at home, has thrown over all her acquaintances, and goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she's peculiar. I don't like it. I feel a little worried over it" (66). As we observe,

Léonce is not strictly upset about Edna's failure to socialize in and of itself. Léonce is upset that she does possess the energy to socialize but chooses not to. She chooses to "[go] trampling about by herself, moping in the street cars, getting in after dark." In other words, Edna prioritizes personal pleasure over that of their marriage. As it was generally the duty of a woman to uphold the will of her husband, Edna's noncompliance could injure Léonce's masculine image. Specifically, word could presumably leak about Edna's rebuff of her peers, and what's more, word could leak about championing her pursuits over what is supposed to be her interminable subservience to her husband. Notwithstanding the inherent triviality of entertaining guests, there is nothing trivial, to him, about the slander such an action might effectuate among the public-at-large.

On the other hand, because John takes precise measures to stop his wife from interacting with anyone other than, in general, himself, his brother, and Jennie, he forestalls her from interacting with others who may undermine the legitimacy of his prescriptive cure. The reason why John does not want Cousin Henry and Julia to meet with the narrator lies in their characterization: "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" (4). We may pay particular heed to the adjective used to describe them, "stimulating," and we may note the implications of its definition during the 19th century as "rousing to action or exertion; spurring or urging on' inciting; *spec*. inclining to mental activity" ("stimulating, *adj*"). Because John aims to sustain his wife in a sleep state—as he himself terms the exigency, "about now"—it would behoove him to forbid her association with others who might then awaken her mental activity. Granted, this is not to say that everyone else aside from

his family may upset him. For instance, the narrator later notes that her immediate family visits without hindrance: “Well, the Fourth of July is over! The people are 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” (5). The difference is that she does not interpose an adjective to describe her family, and especially that she does not place one as active and foreboding as “stimulating.” Thus it stands to reason that John is only looking to prevent her from associating with those who could awaken her to the insincerity of his prescription.

Léonce, though, is too late to stop his wife from making precisely the kind of move John was trying to preclude. Whereas John is successful in constraining his wife’s ability to harm his professional image (at least until the end), Léonce fails in doing so when Edna moves the Pontellier home to Esplanade Street in favor of a “pigeon house.” His peremptory thought, which chiefly concerns the damage it will do to his business prospects rather than his wife’s mental health in making such a move, betrays the fiscal and social emphasis he places on their marriage above all else. Yet the text seems to deny that explicitly:

> He hoped she had not acted upon her rash impulse; and he begged her to consider first, foremost, and above all else, what people would say. He was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning; that was a thing which would never have entered into his mind to consider in connection with his wife’s name or his own. He was simply thinking of his financial integrity. It might get noised about that the Pontelliers met with reverses, and were forced to conduct their *ménage* on a humbler scale than heretofore. It might do incalculable mischief to his business prospects. (93)

Though the language states that “[Léonce] was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning” the accuracy of this sentence renders false upon a closer textual examination. A general

understanding of a "scandal," aside from the sexual sort, connotes a negative public reaction to any unfavorable affair, which is exactly what Léonce predicts when he observes that Edna's actions "might do incalculable mischief to his business prospects." Because pecuniary matters are his first thoughts conjured on Edna's action, it is clear that he has a predilection for viewing his marriage as a financial matter first and anything to do with his wife as a person second.

In both texts, then, there is a price to pay for the prioritization of the public sphere over that of the private. The price is that private suppression causally engenders public retaliation. This retaliation evinces when the narrator directly attributes her making a public spectacle or "creeping" to the painstaking efforts of John and Jennie to suppress her in private: '"I've got out at last, said I, 'in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (12). Due to the narrator terming her release as "in spite of [John] and Jane," we may deduce that she blames them for her inability in the past to break free. Arguably for the first time, the narrator acts with full autonomy in releasing the trapped women inside the yellow wallpaper. In doing so, this public spectacle supersedes her suppression on the part of John and Jennie. Having foregone John's injunctions which tempered her behavior in private liberated her for all of the creeping women in the wallpaper to behold.

The narrator liberates herself for the myriad women in the wallpaper, but Edna liberates herself *from* her family. She would rather die than return to them after Robert, her lover, deserts her forever. Much like the narrator, Edna is not willing to go back to sleep. Given that there lacks any indication that she frets over the negative publicity this act will entail on her husband and children, we may conclude that she rejects her public role altogether, owing to her contempt for them all in her private life: "She thought of Léonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (116). When we

contrast “they need not have thought that they could possess her, body, and soul” with “they were a part of her life,” it becomes clear that Edna considers her true life to be her private life. The corollary, then, is that Léonce and their children are but characters in her public life—characters to whom she must take her own life is she is to live her true life.

Marriage cannot be strictly confined to either the private or public sphere. Both spheres crossover to one another; they are mutually reinforcing. Though one may labor to prevent private matters from leaking to the public, in the case of John and Léonce, the effort is valueless. What affects one party affects the other just as much if not more so. While John and Léonce were using this relationship to their advantage at first in curtailing the liberation of the narrator and Edna, the two wives, in the end, upended their authority by proclaiming their autonomy in relationships that heretofore featured anything but.

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