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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8431>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.8431

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

"A. Scacchi on Chloé Avril's *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, document 9, Online since 27 May 2010, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8431> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.8431>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



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A. Scacchi on Chloé Avril's *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*

- 1 Chloé Avril. *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Themes of sexuality, Marriage, and Motherhood*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. Pp. 199. ISBN: 978-0-7734-4969-5.
- 2 It is widely accepted that Charlotte Perkins Gilman was rescued from oblivion by the feminist movement in the 1970s. In fact, this historical reconstruction of Gilman's fortune is not completely accurate. We can date the revival at least from 1966, when a new edition of *Women and Economics* was reissued by the historian Carl Degler, who ten years earlier had written an essay acknowledging Gilman's importance as "the leading intellectual in the women's movement in the United States." Yet there is no doubt that 1970s and 1980s Anglo-American feminists have determined the Gilman canon and shaped the reception of her work until today. The Feminist Press reprinting, in 1973, of the short story "The Yellow Wall-Paper" edited by Elaine Hedges – who in her afterword declared it "a small literary masterpiece" which confronts "the sexual politics of the male-female, husband-wife relationship" – ignited an unprecedented interest for Gilman as a fiction writer and canonized this text as a "feminist document." From that moment on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" acquired a cult status as an early feminist manifesto dissecting the patriarchal subjugation of women. In spite of Hedges's own acknowledgement that Gilman's reputation as a social analyst had not been completely forgotten and that "The Yellow Wall-Paper" had been included in several anthologies, the short story quickly became a cherished long-lost work and inspired a flourishing industry devoted to its interpretation.
- 3 Early Gilman studies concentrated almost exclusively on "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and Herland, Gilman's well-known utopia of a country inhabited only by women, first published in *The Forerunner* in 1915 and reissued in 1979. Her theoretical work and other fiction were given little attention, and the analysis of her wide-ranging reform project of society often focused only on the issues more closely related to the condition of women, even though for Gilman gender asymmetry was the root cause of all social

problems, from the over-exploitation of natural resources to war, poverty and the degradation of cities. In the last couple of decades, however, most of Gilman's writings has been back in print, including her poems, her letters to her second husband and her diaries, as well as *Unpunished*, a mystery novel for which Gilman could not find a publisher in her lifetime. To the hundreds of essays devoted to "The Yellow Wall-Paper" and *Herland* we can now add a relevant number of studies which explore her theoretical work as well as her short stories and novels. The scale and scope of enquiry has widened to include her relationship with her contemporaries, her views on religion, education, child-rearing, architecture, art, and the environment, her relations with Darwinism and Socialism, and so on. But at the same time the approach to Gilman and her work has shifted considerably. As Judith Allen writes in her recent study, "Gilmaniana flourishes today as never before. [...] Yet Gilman has never been so controversial." While in the first two decades of the revival, Gilman was celebrated as a feminist foremother and scholars praised her lucid analysis of the ways of patriarchy and her prefiguration of contemporary feminist issues, "third-wave" feminists have increasingly addressed the flaws in her theories. In exposing her elitism, racism, nativism and imperialism, they have questioned her status in the U.S. feminist canon and attacked former scholars for their uncritical claiming of Gilman as forerunner and for their failure to address her "maternalist racial nationalism."

- 4 Chloé Avril's study of Gilman's three utopian novels is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of studies of Gilman's oeuvre, for two reasons in particular. First of all, it is one of the few works to analyze Gilman's utopian writing as a whole, in spite of the fact that utopia was Gilman's favorite medium of expression. Secondly, it addresses the problem of Gilman's significance for contemporary feminism from a new perspective without slighting the problems posed by Gilman's nativist views on immigration or her support of eugenics. The book is divided into a general introduction, locating Gilman in relation to both the genre of utopia and Western feminism, and three thematic chapters, which explore in detail her comprehensive critique of patriarchy. Avril interrogates Gilman's views on sexuality, marriage and motherhood, demonstrating that many of the issues confronting women at the turn of the twentieth century, which Gilman lucidly exposed in her writing, keep confronting women today.
- 5 In 1999 Minna Doskow reissued *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915) and its sequel *With Her in Ourland* (1916) in a single volume, with an introduction in which she discussed the three novels in relation to each other, pointing out that utopian fiction was the ideal form to dramatize Gilman's ideas of social reform. Yet most critics have devoted their attention only to *Herland*, neglecting *Moving the Mountain*, deeply influenced by Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1889), because of its overt didacticism and monologism, and *With Her in Ourland*, possibly for its turning away from utopian separatist fantasy to the scathing critique of social ills. As Avril correctly argues, however, the three novels should be regarded as integral to Gilman's utopian project and are to be read one against the other, since they constitute an ideological whole and are closely linked. Analyzing the three works together – instead of isolating *Herland* as an exceptional, visionary feminist fantasy, where Gilman succeeded in liberating her imagination from the constrictions of her times – helps the readers to better understand Gilman's use of utopia as a literary mode and her idea of art as inherently political. All three novels, including the blueprint utopia *Moving the Mountain*, were intended by Gilman "to be read primarily as a critique of her own contemporary society" (19), writes Avril, and only secondarily as portraits of a

desirable and realizable future. While several critics have emphasized the shift from an optimistic belief in the feasibility of the utopian project animating *Moving the Mountain* to the growing sense of distance between utopia and reality that permeates *With Her in Ourland*, Avril also underlines the “concomitant radicalisation in Gilman’s perception of social injustices” (21), and Gilman’s growing awareness that logical reasoning might not be enough to fight patriarchy and construct a better world. In this Avril casts an interesting light on Gilman’s optimistic reformism, which we have come to consider symptomatic of her middle-class feminism and inability to envision change as other than a willing yielding to the superior reasons of enlightened minds. Her optimistic narrative plots showing men easily convinced by daring women into accepting them as equals might be, after all, nothing more than a rhetorical strategy aimed at calling women to action. Although she is not explicit about it, Avril seems to imply that Gilman’s faith in the possibility of persuading human beings away from androcentric culture – which she deems damaging to both men and women as individuals and to the society at large – was not an effect of political naivete and conservatism, but rather a narrative construct closely connected to her chosen genre and to her conviction that literature can change the world by showing other worlds as possible.

- 6 In my opinion this insight would have been better served by literary analysis, but Avril chooses instead to limit her investigation of Gilman’s utopian writing to the level of ideology, without tackling the question of how the literary intersects with the ideological. This is how she explains her choice: “I ... find it more fruitful not to distinguish between the aesthetic qualities of the three texts, but to view them instead on a par with one another ideologically” (9). In fact, I believe that the two aesthetically flawed works can help illuminate the ideological blind spots that in *Herland* have been obscured to many readers by its impressive feminist imagination. When read one against the other, the evident racial imperialism of *Moving the Mountain* and *With Her in Ourland* highlights troubling aspects in the anthropological and sociological interest *Herlanders* seem to have for *Ourland*, which also reverberate in the contemporary discussions between first-world feminists and postcolonial women theorists. Which brings me to the central aim of Avril’s book and the second and most important reason why *The Feminist Utopian Novels of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* is a relevant contribution to Gilman studies. As the author declares in the introductory chapter, “While other critics have tended to dismiss many of Gilman’s ideas about the personal liberation of women as being conservative and out-dated,” Avril wants to demonstrate “the continued relevance of her feminist contribution” (4) through the investigation of the concepts of sexuality, marriage and motherhood in Gilman’s work. Rather than dismiss Gilman as a flawed feminist ancestor who should not play a significant part in today’s feminist discourses, Avril delves into Gilman’s ideas to show that her oeuvre “still has the power to shake us out of complacency and certainty that gender progress has always been made” (34) and can bring awareness to the limitations of feminist thinking today.
- 7 In the chapter on sexuality, for example, Avril approaches the problem of Gilman’s sexual politics from an interesting angle. Gilman’s rejection of sexual freedom is usually chastised as conventionally Victorian, or absolved as the only possibility for early feminists to gain control of their bodies. Grounding her analysis on dissenting voices in the contemporary feminist debate, Avril convincingly argues that sexuality is still linked to violence and abuse rather than pleasure for most women and that

Gilman's understanding of the relationship between sexuality and women's oppression, thus, continues to be challenging. Gilman saw clearly that sexuality cannot be disjunct from dynamics of power and, as Avril underlines, "What is remarkable in her writings is to what extent she was aware of the dangers involved, especially for women, in sexual relations between people of unequal power" (47). Marriage, from this perspective, seemed to Gilman a better alternative than liberated sex because she believed it was a potentially reformable institution, one that women could transform into a relation between equals by selecting their partners with intelligence, while sexual freedom left them at the mercy of men. This is why, according to Avril, Gilman apparently swings between condemning marriage as female servitude and celebrating the nuclear family as desirable. Even though she never really questioned marriage as an institution, her critique of domestic servitude and the gender division of labor, especially in *Herland*, indicates that she was well aware that it functions in support of patriarchy and capitalism. Avril does not shun from investigating Gilman's contradictory ideas about marriage but she also convincingly argues that her critique was more radical than most critics maintain and still pertinent to our times, since the institution of marriage has proved resistant to radical reform.

- 8 In the last chapter Avril carries out even more easily her intent to reinstate Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the feminist canon as a controversial yet important theorist whose analyses highlight dilemmas still confronting contemporary feminisms. Gilman's conception of motherhood, Avril argues, is less an essentialist celebration than a radical revision of this central experience in the lives of women. Given the role currently played by the public discourse on motherhood in the backlash against the women's movement and in the resurgence of nationalisms, Gilman's notions of collective motherhood and of society as nurturing agent remain challenging for us. Yet, as Avril points out, even though "a great radical potential no doubt exists in women's reclaiming the emancipatory educational role of motherhood," we should refrain "from thinking that feminists can easily reappropriate such an oppressive institution and turn it instead into a fully positive instrument for social change and gender liberation" (163). Gilman's contradictory revision of motherhood, which often results in a perplexing celebration of women as mothers and a glorification of the reproductive function as racial selection, demonstrates just that.
- 9 Avril's book does the needed job of reassessing the significance of Gilman's writings today, without glorifying her as feminist mother or dismissing her critique of patriarchy as tainted by racism and American exceptionalism. On the contrary, for Avril exploring Gilman's blind spots is a way to illuminate "similar contradictory feminist practices today" (175). Her study inevitably compels the reader to ask troubling questions about the failure of feminist politics to effect real changes in the gendered division of labor, for example, or in the patriarchal control of women's sexuality. Yet, in my opinion, it would have been desirable on Avril's part to carry her investigation of Gilman's continuing relevance one step further and deal with the reasons behind the failure of the second-wave feminist movement, which may lay precisely in its being grounded in Gilman's elitist feminism.

10 Anna Scacchi, University of Padova, Italy