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The thesis work required me to employ diverse variety of acquired knowledge and skills for my analysis, as well as cross-disciplinary work and research. Furthermore, my thesis has been a space to get lost - from a reality of Covid, and the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is a study of female characterization through dialogue in *The Tempest* (1611) and a close reading of *The Yellow Wall-paper* (1892), which explores how these texts problematize socio-cultural traditions in the backdrop of the marginalized role of women. These two texts are taken from two radically different genres and eras; however, the female voices in both *The Tempest* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* share the desire for equality and change and have the potential to raise awareness to the ongoing gender-based discrimination. In *The Tempest*, the critique is expressed through distorted syntax, specifically in terms of subordinate clauses and tone, while in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the sadistic actions of John are juxtaposed with roles forced on women and the toxicity of the patriarchy.

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## INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that women have been oppressed and domesticated throughout history. Primary sources unveil ideologies with misogynistic tendencies and marginalized women in request for emancipation. Female writers have throughout history praised and promoted positivity to the female gender as a feminist argument against the misogynistic society<sup>1</sup>. Investigation of primary sources from antiquity, throughout The Middle Ages unveil women as “completely subject to the husband’s authority”<sup>2</sup>. These primitive ideologies haunt women even to this day, and the roles imposed on women by society are toxic, stripping the individual of self-determination and autonomy. This thesis will explore critique of toxic ideology evident in the dialogue of Shakespeare’s Miranda, in addition to discuss how Charlotte Perkins Gilman takes the theme of toxicity and poison to another level, revealing the misogyny in the patriarchal system still evident in the contemporary. While many may interpret *The Tempest* under the assumption of Miranda being the angelic, pure and untouched virgin, and the unreliable narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* as simply a victim of “the rest cure”, I argue that these two texts problematize socio-cultural traditions in a more radical way, one through distorted syntax, specifically in terms of subordinate clauses and tone and the other by juxtaposing the sadistic actions of John with roles forced on women.

## THE TEMPEST AND REVERSED GENDER ROLES

In many discussions of Shakespeare’s Miranda, a controversial issue has been whether this female character truly is a representation of or representing the oppressed female. In the article “Shakespeare's Miranda: Angelic or demonic?” Ildikó Limpár argues that, on the

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<sup>1</sup> Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards, 1st ed (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Wim Blockmans and P. C. M. Hoppenbrouwers, *Introduction to Medieval Europe 300-1500*, Third edition (London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 182.

surface, Miranda represents the compassionate angelic housewife, as he claims “She seems to be presented as angelic on the whole”<sup>3</sup>, supporting his later argument that “her character[...]is intentionally kept pure”<sup>4</sup> for the sake of the play. On the contrary, Limpár is clever to conclude that the co-existence of both her angelic and demonic side, as he labels them, is essential to her character as they tell the story of Miranda as “the demonized subservient angel”<sup>5</sup>. This is the description Limpár uses to demonstrate that Miranda is developing into something “demonic”, due to her rebellion against her father Prospero. I am under the opinion that this specific discussion of her character seems to some extent surreal, as its purpose is based on the opinion that Miranda carries demonic traits in her character due to her acts of “rebellion”. Further on, Limpár’s discussion of the demonic is connected to her “double nature”<sup>6</sup> as a woman with both angelic and demonic traits. Interestingly enough, Limpár believes the angelic side of her character is highlighted as a necessity in her function as the allegory of the pure new empire<sup>7</sup>. What he means by this, is that her untouched purity seems to carry many similarities to the setting of the play, as it is set on this fictional and isolated island.

Essentially Limpár argues that Miranda is the emblem of the empire to be gained. As the island becomes “the symbolic representation of lands”<sup>8</sup>, meaning that she, as the embodiment of the island, is an attempt of recreating the original kingdom of Milan. The parallelisms between the setting and Miranda are indeed fascinating, as he points out “the island, separated by water from the rest of the world[...]and its identification with the virgin

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<sup>3</sup> Ildikó Limpár, ‘Shakespeare’s Miranda: Angelic or Demonic?’, *Centre for Arts, Humanities and Science, Acting on Behalf of the University of Debrecen*, Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies, VOL. 9, no. No. 1, Femininity and Subjectivity (Spring 2003): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Limpár, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Limpár, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Limpár, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Limpár, 7.

<sup>8</sup> Limpár, 4.

Miranda”<sup>9</sup>, this means that Miranda, in a way, being separated and isolated from the world, pure and untouched has similarities to the island. Throughout history, land, the source of life, has been recognized as a feminine force (As for instance Gaia, the personification of Earth from Greek mythology). It's no surprise, then, that uninhabited, uncultivated lands have been viewed as virgins to be seized. Limpár argues, that this metaphorical concept is of a psychological nature, made popular during the colonial era. I readily agree that approaching the drama through a postcolonial perspective is highly relevant while taking in consideration the historical context of the play. Therefore, the reading of Mirandas virginity and purity could be seen as a parallel to the uncultivated, and partly uninhabited island.

Clearly, most characters in the world of Shakespeare hold ambiguous undercurrents in their beings, they are not the vice nor the virtue, however me and Limpár's mutual understanding of this character ends in his means of objectifying and trivializing Mirandas individuality, claiming that Shakespeare “preserved the angel for visible purposes of the drama”<sup>10</sup> as a technique to keep her virtue intact and her portrayal as “a real miracle, something beautiful and greatly admired”<sup>11</sup>. Limpár never fully rationalizes this conclusion and it made me wonder. Is it so, that this Renaissance playwright would preserve this female character only as an esthetical touch of beauty, or simply as the allegory of the ideal female, meaning the angelic “miracle”, the manifestation of “admiration”? The virgin (Island) ready to be conquered? And if so, wouldn't that only contribute as, yet another proof of the misogyny still evident in society? And how exactly is this a claim that contradicts the true intension of this character? Allow me to demonstrate.

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<sup>9</sup> Limpár, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Limpár, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Limpár, 8.

Readers, or viewers, of *The Tempest* often tend to overlook the important voice of Miranda. Through language, this young woman expresses strong vitality, self-determination, and the desire to dethrone herself from the pedestal. I would dare to say that her “rebellious” nature is not to be recognized as something sinful, or demonic but simply as human. Miranda is commonly assumed to be a portrayal of the angelic; however, I argue that being aware of that Shakespeare employed complex characterization techniques to describe his characters through dialogue, we find evidence of a far more three-dimensional Miranda. This is significant because; it’s in the dialogue that Shakespeare's critique of women's marginalized roles is revealed, roles from which Miranda clearly seeks to escape. If we look back at some claims made by Limpár, and I would like to stress that my goal is not to contradict his claims, however, to emphasize the common misreading of Miranda. Limpár delineates that “The only time where Miranda seems to skip her assigned angelic role is her speech to Caliban in act 1, scene 2”<sup>12</sup>, this argument trivializes her process and project of redefining her identity.

Clues indicate that Miranda is acting against and ‘skipping her assigned angelic role’ more than once in her acts of physical labor and self-expression through language. Furthermore, Limpár states that Miranda only once is identified as a goddess, however it is evident in multiple scenes involving her, that she is put up on a pedestal and *godified*, not once but numerous times, against her will. This argument establishes suspicion to whether he is oblivious to recognize Miranda in the process of re-constructing her own identity or simply trivializing her purpose in the play as merely the metaphor for colonialism. As this truly is fascinating in many ways, I believe Shakespeare had greater plans for his Miranda. Examining Miranda, on the surface, not only causes her to lose her voice, however also her crucial function as a critique of the way society inhibited women, instituted women in

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<sup>12</sup> Limpár, 6.



confined abstract “space” in a hierarchy, or in some concrete “place” as in a demanding residence that claim both commitment and freedom.

In other words, language is critical to comprehend Miranda's true nature, as she portrays and challenges the marginalized role women had at the time. Throughout the play, Miranda's father, Prospero, and future husband, Ferdinand, place her on upon a pedestal. This is key, as it is not only revealing the unrealistic expectations of women, however also the traditions of wanting to control women, assigning them “their place”. This control is making her incapable of personal development as a young woman during her years of puberty, and the Island itself is enhancing Prospero’s control of this young woman in a confined space, as she has nowhere to escape. The most prominent traits of Miranda are linked to the archetypical associations of women as “passive[...]timid[...]emotional”<sup>13</sup>. This is evident in act 1, scene 2, where her compassionate side is exhibited after witnessing the shipwreck “Oh, I have suffered/With those that I saw suffer”<sup>14</sup> In this scene Miranda is expressing her sympathy and immediately after Prospero encourages Miranda to rest, as if she is suffering from emotional distress “Lie there[...]have comfort”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, he demands her to “Obey, and be attentive”<sup>16</sup> and describes her compassion as a virtue “the very virtue of compassion in thee”<sup>17</sup> Again we witness the oppression and objectivation of her being, along with indications that she may be “weak” and “tired” after the emotional distress.

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<sup>13</sup> M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Eleventh edition (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015), 125.

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, Peter Hulme, and William H. Sherman, *The Tempest: An Authoritative Text, Sources and Contexts, Criticism, Rewritings and Appropriations*, Second edition, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 6 (1.2.5-6).

<sup>15</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 7 (1.2.25).

<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 8 (1.2.38).

<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 7 (1.2.27).

The distorted syntax of her dialogue is enhancing her attempt to dethrone herself, and as the sentences in her speech pattern break free in subordinate clauses, they stand independently against the grammatical rules, which reflects Miranda's wish of independence and equality. Miranda's style of speech is less formal, more efficient, and more concentrated when contrasted to other characters in the play. Notice how Miranda is the character who opens scene 2 in act 1. This is a compositional choice to emphasize the importance of her character.

Miranda, the play's only visible female character, is seen in this scene (Act 1, scene 2) uttering her lines, which exude both vitality and determination from the start. The scene opens and Miranda and her father Prospero are down at the beach witnessing a storm in the far, and the wild waters demolish a ship at sea. Miranda speaks for the first time and with a powerful line. "If by your art, my dearest father, you have/ Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them!"<sup>18</sup> In this conditional clause, with an imperative form, we witness Miranda giving her father instructions and order him what to do. As Prospero has magical powers, Miranda is accusing him of creating the tempest, and tell him to calm the waters. The "If", in initial position, emphasizes the rhetorical construction in her dialogue which is the language of command and argument between equals. Moreover, the grammatical parallelism in "your" and "you" emphasizes the tone as dramatic and loud in its repetition, and the open vowels "Oh![...]O! the cry" later in the same scene adds a musicality and playfulness to her lines. The longer speeches she has early in the play resembles a knocking beat, signaling her desire to break through the restrictive "walls" of her confined space.

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<sup>18</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 6 (1.2.1-2).

When comparing the first two lines, we discover that her utterances challenge the heart-beating rhythmical style of blank verse, often employed by Shakespeare, and breaks free from the expectation and structure first established. Succeeding the poetic prelude “if/0” in initial position, the stressed and unstressed syllables form a clear rhythmical pattern.

Line one; 0 Xx Xx Xx Xx (Xx) which is following the meter of Iambic pentameter, however in line two the meter completely breaks down and free; Xx XX xx Xx Xx.

“If by your art, my dearest father, you have/
○ X x X x Xx Xx X x
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them”
X x X Xx x x X, xX x

These syntactical discoveries are important as they enhance Mirandas force and vital spirit and underpin the idea of Miranda as something more than just the subservient and angelic character she usually is interpreted as. This is key as it truly unveils the playwright’s intension for this character. Analyzing the very first line in this scene in even greater detail, we see how the use of second-person pronoun, which is “you” while addressing her father, while the other characters refer to Prospero as either “thee” or “thou” as a marker of respect. Besides expressing herself in this manner, her actions of disobeying the rules imposed on her by her father, is yet another sign of her dethronement.

The evidence of Miranda wanting to escape her role on the island is endless, Ferdinand refers to Miranda as a wonder, which in fact is the meaning of her name “O you wonder!”<sup>19</sup> she replies “No wonder, sir,/But certainly a maid”<sup>20</sup> she is clearly redefining herself, from being the admired statue on a pedestal to wanting to be treated as an equal.

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 21 (1.2.425).

<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 21 (1.2.426- 427).

Miranda is defying social conventions by communicating in a less sophisticated manner. Her dialogue, is different from the elevated tone of her father and Ferdinand. Scenes with longer and more challenging speeches sometimes acquire *The Tempest* a false reputation of being a "difficult" play, however the elevated style of some character in juxtaposition to Miranda's simpler syntax is hard to ignore. The turning point in the play occurs in act 3.1, and we have yet another instance of Miranda wanting to liberate herself. Miranda offers to "bear your logs"<sup>21</sup>, and Ferdinand continues to try to put her on a pedestal "Indeed the top of admiration"<sup>22</sup>, his heart becomes anthropomorphized and flies up to her "My heart fly to your service"<sup>23</sup> and shockingly, Miranda proposes marriage to Ferdinand, also in a strikingly informal manner, "My husband, then?"<sup>24</sup>, an action which clearly reverses gender roles. Clearly, Miranda's lines of distorted syntax and actions emphasize her function as Shakespeare's critique of the marginalized role of women.

Last, but not least, Prospero puts Miranda to sleep, without her consent. This is the most powerful way of mirroring her lack of control, despite the fact that her dialogue demonstrates that she is strong-willed and desires to be self-determined. Her individual freedom is indeed harmed by the magic that paralyses her, sedates her, and regulates her perception of the world. These things combined paradoxically link Miranda to the reality of the misogynistic hierarchy evident in The Renaissance.

*The Tempest* was written in The Renaissance, a time with cultural ethos's evolved around humanism and individualism. This era is frequently described as the birth of the modern world following the dark ages, and it draws inspiration from prehistoric myths and traditions. Overwhelmingly, women were still trivialized and exploited through marriage at

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<sup>21</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 41 (3.1.23).

<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 41 (3.1.38).

<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 42 (3.1.65).

<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 43 (3.2.87).

the time, and women still lacked access to adequate education. The socio-historical characteristics of this period is evident in the play, and as shown language is consciously distorted in *The Tempest* to emphasize the critique of gender roles. The importance of language is evident throughout the play, specifically in subordinate clauses that occasionally appear out of place in a sentence, this style of writing is rarely particularly perplexing, however, the idiosyncratic fashion is evidently meant to enhance the importance of language, letting the characters act or rebel against the “tradition”, therefore modifying, and challenging the existing order.

On the surface, *The Tempest* exhibits the primitive ideology of the female as silent, passive, and angelic, however, Shakespeare’s critique of the gender roles lies in the dialogue which provide insights in the female character of Miranda. Through language, we witness how the female character deconstructs and constructs her identity in the play and how her dialogue divulges her true nature, despite the fact that she was “drugged” with magic.

We can consider these points and look at the unreliable narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She is yet another female character struggling to cope with the gender-based oppression and is like Miranda, limited in her desire to self-express. The female characters in both *The Tempest* and *The Yellow Wallpaper* are subjected to controlling and manipulative men. Men that act on behalf of these women, robbing them of the ability to make informed decisions. As a result, they are deprived of their autonomy and personal integrity. Both women are under the spell of men who make life-changing decisions for them, arranged marriage in *The Tempest* and incarceration and medication in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. As Miranda is using language to break free from her role, so is the unreliable narrator. Moreover, the confined space (meaning the room in the summerhouse or institution) in which the unreliable narrator is controlled, can in many ways be seen parallel to the island where

Miranda is controlled, and the paralysis of mind and body is a dominating aspect in both of their realities. Despite the fact that *The Tempest* does not have any type of wall construction, sadistic husbands or poisonous wallpaper, the similarities between the settings of these two texts also enhance the haunting patriarchy across the centuries. There is something thought provoking about how the view of women somehow seems to have stagnated between these two texts, and how there is a repetition of isolating a female figure in a hazardous environment.

While many assume *The Yellow Wallpaper*, simply to be a “a literary case-study in the oppression and repression of a middle-class white woman in the United States in the late nineteenth century”<sup>25</sup>, evidence show that Gilman, in fact, not only wanted to critique the rest cure, but also problematize the socio-cultural traditions of relegating women into a set of roles. Roles that seem purely toxic to some individuals, in the way that, their limitations prohibit them of living as free individuals. This could be compared to a long-term poisoning of the spirit, as it slowly drains the creative and passionate energy within. On a higher level the elements of poison in Gilman’s short story have many parallels to the toxic effects of patriarchy, as it prohibits women to be intellectually, creatively, and physically active.

## **POISON IN DOMESTIC PRISONS**

In “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses”, Jürgen Wolter argues that the wallpaper connotes Victorian patriarchy as well as woman’s empowerment; however, the ambiguity and irony of the resolution of the narrator’s anticlimactic “victory”, mirrors the extreme suggestiveness and irony in the text. In terms of female empowerment,

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, Fifth edition (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 215.

Wolter claims that the unreliable narrator somehow manages to escape a threefold oppression “as woman, as wife, and as patient”<sup>26</sup> in three steps. First, the “nursery” where she is kept, represents a place where she can be taken care of as a child and needs not to be a woman. Secondly, she “then starts to play with the pattern of the wallpaper”<sup>27</sup>, following the pattern of the paper “up and down[...]diagonally[...] horizontally”<sup>28</sup>, which the unreliable narrator herself describes as “as good as gymnastics”<sup>29</sup>. Thirdly, Wolter points out her liberation from the status as patient as “she turns to physical exercise wrestling with the paper”<sup>30</sup>. On the contrary Wolter claims that the wallpaper itself, at another level, connotes the brutal Victorian patriarchy. “The narrator in Gilman’s story complains that the yellow wallpaper in the room is “torturing” [...] It slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples on you” (25)<sup>31</sup>. Wolter suggests that the intrusive and brutal pattern of the paper is partly what makes the protagonist ill<sup>32</sup>, more importantly, the color of it. The unreliable narrator claims it is “the strangest yellow[...]makes me think of all yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things”<sup>33</sup>. From here Wolters investigation of “Gilman’s unclean yellow”<sup>34</sup>, a type of corrupted and poisonous yellow that the narrator herself describes as a “repellant[...]revolting[...]unclean yellow”<sup>35</sup> with “a sickly sulphury tint”<sup>36</sup> is to be viewed as a parallel to the toxic patriarchy.

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<sup>26</sup> Jürgen Wolter, “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses’, *Univeritätsverlag WINTER Heidelberg*, n.d., 5.

<sup>27</sup> Wolter, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Wolter, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories* (London: ARCTURUS Publishing LTD, 2018), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Wolter, “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses’, 5.

<sup>31</sup> Wolter, 196.

<sup>32</sup> Wolter, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Wolter, “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses’, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Perkins Gilman, 12.

The obtrusive print, he suggests is “the decadence and decay of the conventional male-dominated marriage and the cultural codes represented by John”<sup>37</sup>. The repetitive print of “florid arabesque”<sup>38</sup> could be linked to the systematic oppression of women, and the wallpaper itself, as the narrator’s rebellion with it, as her journey out of her husband’s world<sup>39</sup>. As Wolter points out, she repeatedly emphasizes (and reassures herself of) John’s authority at the start of her psychological voyage out of his world; her rebellion is still suppressed in her subconscious, and its symbol, the yellow wallpaper, is thus still repulsive to her. What is interesting is how the paper slowly becomes a part of her and consumes all her thoughts. Wolter stresses that; as a result, the unreliable narrator develops a strong sense of possession towards it and in a way becomes what she fears. She “manages to re-vision the patriarchal enemy as an image of herself”<sup>40</sup>. An image which I believe has deep roots in the notion of ownership, as she seems to be completely subject to John’s authority. The wallpaper becomes an opportunity in her quest for independence, and her desire to own the paper is linked to her desire to write her own story.

The unreliable narrator, and her writing and reading of two papers (her diary and the actual wallpaper) may be a commentary and response to the ongoing public debate on the effects of reading and writing on women. As we frequently witness through the story, the protagonist is prohibited in writing, and this functions as yet another way of showing how women were prohibited to self-express. The obsessive “reading” of the paper signals her under stimulated intellectuality. Wolter highlights the widely accepted theory of the time of that “the increase in insanity is due to the increase of education”<sup>41</sup>, and while the unreliable

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<sup>37</sup> Wolter, “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses”, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Wolter, “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses”, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Wolter, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Wolter, 9.



narrator is finding ways to write (in her diary) and read (the paper), it's highly ironic that we, as readers, learn that the prohibition of participating in these activities is part of what makes her sick. She writes in her diary that the activity of writing is “a great relief to my mind”<sup>42</sup>. I would also suggest that the marginalizing and excluding of women from intellectual activities also is commented in the title of this short story, as Gilman changes the word wallpaper into wall-paper, enhancing the wallpaper itself as a yellow book that the narrator uses in her means to stimulate her own intellect, and as Wolter claims “to read her own (hi)story”<sup>43</sup>. She finds a counterweight to John's medical knowledge by “owning” and reading the wallpaper. She writes her story of suffering and liberation by tearing, scratching, and greasing over the paper and erasing the text of her husband's world. The refusal to assume the traditional role of the archetypal wife and her “extinction of the foreign (male) code system restores life to her as a (female) reader who then can become a writer of her own text”<sup>44</sup>.

In addition to her experience of liberation in relation to the wallpaper, Wolter also points out that this victory over John and his patriarchal arrogance is a combination of three “endings”<sup>45</sup>, and three instances of control: First, she begins to control her surroundings and its décor by ripping up the wallpaper, i.e., she sets herself free within the domestic prison. Second, her acts of control drive her husband insane to the point where he loses control of himself and faints. Finally, she completes the writing of her texts, both in her diary and on the wall. The fact that she writes the final sentence in retrospect could also imply that she has gained freedom<sup>46</sup>. Like we saw in *The Tempest*, the concept of women in the process of deconstructing and constructing their identities seem to be a common theme. As Miranda was

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<sup>42</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Wolter, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Wolter, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Wolter, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Wolter, 13.

re-constructing herself, so is the unreliable narrator. After tearing down the wallpaper, she discovers a blank wall, a clean slate, and perhaps a new beginning to construct her new self. I would once again like to emphasize that there does not seem to be any resolution of this short story. The ironic and ambiguous ending indicates how gender-based marginalization and oppression persist, and we never really reach a definitive conclusion.

Nevertheless, it is disturbingly clear how the actual wallpaper, on a higher level, symbolizes the rotten system, and of course how the pattern symbolizes the invisible “bars” of the patriarchy. The bars that keep her in this noxious environment, from which she wants to escape. This is seen in recurrent images of the narrator’s physical battle with the paper, for instance when the unreliable narrator and her “subconscious” are attempting to “shake” it down. She writes in her diary that “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.”<sup>47</sup> The meaning behind pointing this out, is to (like Wolter) emphasize that the text embodies elements that provoke and engage suspicion of a stronger, more radical undertaking than it just being a critique of the rest cure.

I believe that Gilman juxtaposes Johns sadistic act of slowly poisoning his wife with a lethal concoction of chemicals, drinks, and food, with the marginalized role of women. The “sickly sulphur tint”<sup>48</sup>, being the second chemical mentioned in the story, alongside with phosphates, and other poisonous elements as “budding and sprouting”<sup>49</sup> toadstools in the room, highlight the sphere in which she is kept as a highly poisonous environment. On a metaphorical level, the room itself could be viewed as a souring and noxious sphere for women’s emancipation. The establishment of how sickening the wallpaper is to her, is further

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<sup>47</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Perkins Gilman, 12.

<sup>49</sup> Perkins Gilman, 21.

enhanced by her description of “the smell!”<sup>50</sup>, the “enduring odor”<sup>51</sup> that permeates her entire being. The abstract idea of patriarchy is manifested in the concrete space of this short story and unveils it as this poisonous domestic prison. Historian Craig Colton points out in his article “Historical Questions in Hazardous Waste Management”, that discoveries of highly toxic particles in the form of arsenic from certain types of wallpaper, and particularly ochre shades tinted with Paris-green, was highly debated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is the type of unclean yellow, is the same that the narrator is describing. She writes in her diary that she is tortured by it, a statement that would support that this is the unclean yellow, which Colton describes as “highly toxic in concentrated form and debilitating if ingested in small quantities over lengthy periods”<sup>52</sup>.

These facts support the alternative reading of the text and Wolters argument that the protagonist’s husband (or perhaps doctor) could be poisoning her on purpose, by keeping her under lock and key in the room with that wallpaper. The suspicion of John poisoning her is increasingly underpinned by his profession, as Newspapers like *American Scientific*<sup>53</sup>, also published arsenic antidote recipes, at the time when the story took place, and it was by 1890 a well-known phenomenon that arsenic was highly toxic. As Wolter also argues “One would suspect the narrator’s husband, as a physician of ‘high standing’[...]to be familiar with the current debate on the effects of arsenic in wallpaper”<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> Perkins Gilman, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Craig Colton, ‘Historical Questions in Hazardous Waste Management’, *University of California Press* 1, no. The Public historian 10 (11 December 1998): 14.

<sup>53</sup> ‘*Scientific American*’, popular four-paged weekly newspaper printed from 1845, from *Wikipedia*, 11 February 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scientific\\_American&oldid=1071260456](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scientific_American&oldid=1071260456).

<sup>54</sup> Wolter, “‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’: The Ambivalence of Changing Discourses”, 8.

My further investigations on the chemical reactions of arsenic, revealed that the arsenic only released lethal iotas while heated, for instance by sunlight<sup>55</sup>, and as the narrator is staying there “for the summer”<sup>56</sup>, the odor of the arsenic is made detectable for her senses, as it is activated by sunlight, causing a “distinctive garlic odor”<sup>57</sup>, the odor which she comments numerous times. Clues indicating that the wallpaper changes in different lightning further support this, as she writes in her diary “it changes as the light changes”<sup>58</sup> and by moonlight she “wouldn’t know it was the same paper”<sup>59</sup>, however whenever the sun “shines directly upon it[...]it makes me tired”<sup>60</sup>. This again explicates why her activity level seems to increase during nighttime, in scenes trying save her subconscious self. The poisonous gas molecules released from wallpaper, is highly concentrated in the room due to “damp weather”<sup>61</sup> and this fusion of chemicals is anthropomorphized into a spirit-like creature by the narrator. She says that “It creeps all over the house [...] lying in wait for me on the stairs”<sup>62</sup>. This is interesting as, like mentioned before, many assume that *The Yellow Wallpaper* is about the rest cure. That would make the character of John viewed as innocent of his sadistic acts, and oblivious to the poisoning of his wife.

The toxicity of her husband is not only evident in the fact that he ignores her wishes, forcing her to stay in the room despite the fact that she clearly wishes to leave, however also in the fact that he obviously notices his wife’s (or perhaps patient’s) physical struggle with the toxic wallpaper, and he does nothing to interfere with it other than laughing at her<sup>63</sup>, and

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<sup>55</sup> ‘The Facts on Arsenic | Dartmouth Toxic Metals’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://sites.dartmouth.edu/toxmetal/arsenic/the-facts-on-arsenic/>.

<sup>56</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> ‘The Facts on Arsenic | Dartmouth Toxic Metals’.

<sup>58</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> Perkins Gilman, 21.

<sup>60</sup> Perkins Gilman, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Perkins Gilman, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Perkins Gilman, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Perkins Gilman, 13.

sedating her mind and body with a weird set of “tonics”. Her surroundings and the medication she is given, is seemingly making her weak and drowsy as she complains “I am tierd out[...]it tierd me out”<sup>64</sup> , “now I am awfully lazy[...]I wish he would let me go!”<sup>65</sup>. The fact that he gives her medication in the form of “phosphates”<sup>66</sup> , decides when and what she will eat, and drink is a reminder of the physical control he has over her.

The combination of arsenic (from the wallpaper), phosphates (from her medication<sup>67</sup>) selenium (from the rare meat she is fed<sup>68</sup>) and sulfur (from the wine<sup>69</sup>), is a potential lethal concoction that is given to the narrator with the intension of slowly poisoning her to death. The description of her room is strikingly similar to a chamber or prison, and not as a space for healing. The barred windows, the rings in the wall, and the nailed-down bed suggests a prison cell or a torture chamber.

As a physician John would have good knowledge of the periodic table, and basic skills of chemical reactions. Arsenic is a nitrogen-based heavy metal that is extremely toxic. It belongs to group 15 in the periodic table, and so does phosphorus. Formally, any salt of a phosphorus oxoacid is a phosphate, which is the "medicine" given to the unreliable narrator. “It is the similarity between these two derivatives that makes arsenic dangerous: thus, its implication in many infamous homicides and questionable deaths over the last 2000 years”<sup>70</sup>. We might, reasonably, wonder if this is a coincidence (John’s poisonous brew) , however the layers of complexity and the details in this story are very carefully put together. How

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<sup>64</sup> Perkins Gilman, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Perkins Gilman, 11.

<sup>66</sup> Perkins Gilman, 10.

<sup>67</sup> Perkins Gilman, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Perkins Gilman, 18.

<sup>69</sup> Perkins Gilman, 18.

<sup>70</sup> Ryan Knodle, Pratima Agarwal, and Mark Brown, ‘From Phosphorous to Arsenic: Changing the Classic Paradigm for the Structure of Biomolecules’, *Biomolecules* 2, no. 2 (30 May 2012): 282–87, <https://doi.org/10.3390/biom2020282>.

convenient is it not that John is feeding her with rare meat<sup>71</sup> (weirdly specific), which contains high levels of selenium, and wine, which contains high levels of sulphury. These chemicals are also closely related to and destabilizes arsenic. As a result, the biochemical process of the arsenic molecules being taken up in the body is aggressively multiplied. These clues unveil Johns sadistic masterplan of poisoning his wife to death and is truly a reminder of the toxicity of the patriarchy. Surprisingly, the unseen poison resembles the hidden, paradoxically poisonous ideologies ingrained in society either in the form of subliminal messages in media, or through outdated social norms.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, these texts evoke conflicting and ramified networks of references through their female characters: their powerful equivocality and complexity, both exhibit the imprisoned and controlled female in a hazardous and marginalized position. Regardless that Shakespeare's play and Gilman's short story are two very different types of compositions written centuries apart, they provide significant parallels.

In quite different ways, both invite us to think critically about gender-based oppression and in particular, the marginalized role of women. Both heroines are seeking a way to escape the poisonous environment in which they are held captive. Miranda breaking the conventions and reversing gender roles through language, the unreliable narrator in the rebellion of reading and writing her own story. We can conclude, in the light of these findings, that the patriarchy and its misogyny, haunted these women, and is a toxic ideology we find ingrained in society to this day. As shown, the request for equality is evident across the centuries. In the revelation of the conclusion, we discover how these two texts have the potential to influence

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<sup>71</sup> Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper & Other Stories*, 18.

our current decisions. Angelic or demonic, defeat or victory, rationality or insanity: Shakespeare and Gilman highlights issues that could help influence us towards more enlightened choices, as many women are still not in control over their own destinies and lack the opportunity to be free self-determined individuals. As many may question the relevancy of yet another thesis on female emancipation, the ongoing discrimination must come to an end. Control over the female body and sexuality in forms of inhumane abortion laws still exist, and the discussion of this particular topic is highly relevant as *The Guardian* early in May 2022 published leaked information about how "The US is set to end 50 years of a woman's right to choose"<sup>72</sup>. The Supreme Court may overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the case which gave the rights and protection of the liberty for women to have abortions without undue government restrictions. Many women are still domesticized and exploited. Trophy wives and arranged marriages for political, religious, and economic constraints persist. Female genital mutilation is still practiced. The inequalities in work environments are present in the form of unequal pay for equal work. How many centuries will it take for humanity to recognize its ignorance? To recognize that essentialism is not only harmful to women, yet also the progress towards a sustainable society and life in a deferential relationship with earth.

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<sup>72</sup> Weronika Strzyżyńska, 'Erosion of Abortion Rights Gathers Pace around the World as US Signals New Era', *The Guardian*, Tue 3 May, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/may/03/erosion-of-abortion-rights-gathers-pace-around-the-world-as-us-signals-new-era>.

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