Love and Economics:
Charlotte Perkins Gilman on "The Woman Question"

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In 1898, Charlotte Perkins Gilman boldly pronounced economic independence to be the answer to the Woman Question.[1] Readers of her internationally-acclaimed *Women and Economics* were prepared to take her solution seriously. As one reviewer wrote, "Each of us was mulling away on her own little corner of the problem, with no idea that it [woman] was a Question, until Mrs. Stetson [as she was then known] dared get it into print" (Perry 892). Another concluded, "No woman, whatever her position or the conditions surrounding her, can read the book and not feel that the whole argument applies to herself and her concerns almost like a personal appeal" ("Charlotte Perkins Stetson" 115).

Gilman's "whole argument" in *Women and Economics* is fairly straightforward: as a result of middle-class women's economic dependence on men, they had become more feminine and less human, thwarting what Gilman took to be evolution's plan. The process would only reverse itself once these women learned to stand on their own two feet. And once they did, both they and the men, also stunted by current inequities, would finally fulfill their human potential, to the world's great benefit. Though others had made similar arguments, few had stated the case so succinctly or persuasively. Suffrage leader Carrie Chapman Catt deemed *Women and Economics* an "immortal book on the status of women,... utterly revolutionizing the attitude of mind in the entire country, indeed of other countries, as to woman's place" (qtd. in "Charlotte Gilman" 3). In her day, Gilman was considered the brains of the woman's movement and *Women and Economics* "the outstanding book on Feminism" (Schwimmer). Her thoughts on women's rights and wrongs were seen as visionary, providing the necessary answers to the day's burning questions, chief among them questions of gender.

Among the many reviews and commentaries devoted to *Women and Economics* was a dialogue published in the *Critic,* featuring a "Tea with a Subject" held to discuss Gilman's influential views on the Woman Question. The attendees' opinions of the book vary, but they concur when one of their number faults Gilman for failing to mention "the power of love" as the reason women marry and stay married (Perry 892). This seems an odd indictment, for two reasons: first, the author was falling in love with her first cousin George Houghton Gilman while writing *Women and Economics* and so would herself have been preoccupied with "the power of love" at the time; and second, *Women and Economics* does indeed discuss love, on several occasions, albeit in idealized terms. That is, it focuses on love's ideals—"what love looks forward to," as Gilman phrases it—rather than the practicalities (219). This tendency to optimistic abstraction could explain why the tea-goers concluded that the topic of love gets short shrift in the book; so, too, could Gilman's heavier emphasis on the "sexuo-economic" basis of modern marriage, on its status as an institution premised less on love than on the exchange of domestic service for food and shelter (86).

Admittedly, Gilman's treatment of love in *Women and Economics* is both light and slight. Do her pronouncements (and silences) concerning "love's power" teach us anything about her ongoing love affair, and vice-versa? Reading *Women and Economics* vis-à-vis this burgeoning relationship—and as the product of prior disastrous ones—clarifies its polemics as well as the author's own difficulties with the book's central issues. If, as the title of one article read, "America's Leading Feminist... Says That the 'Woman Question' Is Not One of Sex but of Economics," the leading feminist herself was never so decisive, never so certain in her own life which of the two should take precedence (Gilman, "America's"). Before, during, and after both of her marriages, Gilman struggled to reconcile the demands of love and work, so much so that even while writing *Women and Economics,* she had yet satisfactorily to test out her theory that their reconciliation was not only possible but would, as she put it in her treatise, enable men and women at long last to form a "higher, truer union" (219). Her first marriage failed largely because she could not see how to reconcile the two; the second marriage she was contemplating as she completed *Women and Economics* constituted in her own mind "a big risk," "an experiment" in combining love and work that could prove unsuccessful—"if I can't," she wrote Houghton, "I can't!" (10 Mar. 1898).[2] The theory upon which her treatise's arguments are based, then, represents the triumph of hope over experience.

Throughout her career, Gilman often used her public pronouncements to confidently solve other women's problems while simultaneously bemoaning in her private writings her own longstanding woes. In *Women and Economics* Gilman contends, "We need the society of those dear to us, their love and companionship" (260). But she does not go on to explain how women of her class might retain this society while maintaining a steady job, perhaps because she was unsure of how to do so herself. Readers who exulted in her insistence that a woman's economic independence was the necessary ingredient to a fulfilling life would likely have scratched their heads had they known how much the author herself agonized over the recipe for fulfillment, not only before entering her first unhappy marriage but also during the prolonged courtship preceding her second happy one. In both of these relationships, she struggled to achieve a balance between what she deemed "loving and living," the latter her term for working in the larger world toward its greater good ("Three Women" 119). In both, rather than finding a way to combine love and career, she remained perpetually out of kilter, with one or the other taking precedence depending on her mood and experiences. While in *Women and Economics* she contends that women's economic freedom will so improve marriage that "men and women . . . will be able at last to meet on a plane of pure and perfect love," she could not yet stride steadily onto that plane herself, even after attaining a measure of the economic freedom she so desired (300). In matters of both love and work, hers was not a teleological path from dependence to independence so much as a continual ricocheting between the two poles.

Established versions of Gilman's life story typically suggest that she grew from the insecurities and despair of her first marriage—memorialized symbolically in her classic "The Yellow Wall-Paper"—to the confidence that inspired *Women and Economics* and her later didactic works. In the intervening years, she had struggled to support herself and her young daughter, gained a wider perspective on the world through years of travel, and fallen in love with a man who treated her as an equal if not his superior. Yet closer scrutiny of her private papers reveals that she was as, if not more, uncertain about her role as woman, wife, and worker the second-time around, gun-shy after her disastrous first encounter with married life. The theory she lays down in *Women and Economics* thus reflects wishful thinking on her part. At the time of the book's composition, she had yet to implement her own theories, yet to prove to herself that one could find happiness when both marriage and career were combined. At the time of the book's composition, the woman who confidently declared that the answer to women's problems was economic independence and world service was herself recurrently plagued by the very doubts and difficulties that made "woman" a question in the first place.

"I *don't* combine": Charlotte and Walter

Charlotte's troubled family life and difficult adolescence left her convinced that her dreams of becoming a world worker were endangered by her identity as a woman. This conviction animated her relationship with her first husband, the artist Charles Walter Stetson. The Stetson marriage is by now familiar territory, the relevant information presented in classrooms across the country as background for the author's most canonical work of fiction, "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Students may come away from this story persuaded that the husband was a bit of a brute and the wife his helpless dupe—a reading that is often extended to the real-life counterparts. But the facts are more complicated. Throughout their troubled years together, Charlotte called many of the shots, and while she would later convince herself that she had been tragically cornered, her papers reveal that she walked into her marriage with eyes wide open. Her skepticism about the prospects of combining love and work was not the result of her marriage but the very issue that postponed its occurrence and heightened its misery.

In her autobiography Charlotte describes Walter as "quite the greatest man, near my own age, that I had ever known" (*Living* 82). She admired his stoic dedication to his art and his genius, and she admired the way he admired her. Yet she saw herself as "pretty evenly balanced, animal & spiritual" and believed Walter appealed primarily to her animal side; giving in to him, or "giving up," as she put it, "would mean relinquishment of all my plans" (Stetson 33). In a letter written in the first weeks of their relationship and transcribed by Walter in his diary, she candidly informed him, "I am not the combining sort: I *don't* combine, and I don't want to." She resisted being merged into a union, however benign. Her dedication to "public service" led her to "calmly accept . . . the fact that the happiness of most women was no happiness for me." Still, she dreaded "the towering selfhood" that since meeting Walter had reasserted itself as well as the possibility that their present joy in the friendship might ultimately lead to heartbreak. She concludes her letter with the vow, "I will give and give and give you *of* myself, but never give myself to you or any man," and signs off, "Truly I am in appearance a lady, in nature a woman, but first and always Charlotte A. Perkins" (Stetson 29-30). This revelatory letter reflects the degree of Charlotte's emotional turmoil. Walter both threatened her self and invoked a "towering" version of it, which was itself the threat. For this "towering selfhood" emerged whenever she rejoiced in Walter's affection for her, and her aim as a potential world servant was to think less of self and more of others. The "Charlotte A. Perkins" who is pre-eminent, the self who will never be given away to anyone, is thus not this tower of emotional needs and desires but a projection of an ideal independent self, one who should tower over the self that might be satisfied by love, one who should tower over conventional ladylike constructs and any essential womanly nature, a bigger and better version of identity.

When Walter proposed marriage soon after their first meeting, Charlotte equivocated. As she told him, "I cannot marry, although I am fitted to enjoy all that marriage can give to the utmost. Were I to marry, my thoughts, my acts, my whole life would be centered in husband and children. To do the work that I have planned I must be free" (Stetson 32). Note that even as she dedicated herself to work, she was simultaneously painting a picture of herself as his ideal mate. In a twelve-page letter to Walter, she affirmed the rightness of her commitment to her "highest use and happiness" as a world worker even as she rejoiced that he has "grandly crowned" her with his love. She concludes by welcoming as "Simply Paradise" the opportunity of continued meetings in order to continue testing what for her was *the* question: "Whether I am most a woman or Charlotte A. Perkins" (Stetson 37-38). When she avowed in her earlier letter that she did not "combine," she may have been referring directly to the idea of marriage, but implicitly and even more essentially, she resisted combining conventional understandings of femininity with her idealized notions of personal identity. In short, she sought to disavow the name "woman" in order to retain the name "Perkins."

In perhaps the most famous lines from *Women and Economics*, Gilman brands as "grossly unjust," even "evil," the idea that a girl must marry to find fulfillment: "To the young girl . . . marriage is the one road to fortune, to life. . . . [E]verything . . . tells her that she is *she*, and that all depends on whom she marries. . . . '[H]e' is the coming world" (86-87). Indicting the double standard, she rails against the reduction of a woman's identity from the full humanity afforded men to a narrowly gendered, heterosexual existence. And yet, Charlotte herself found this "one road" often enticing and not necessarily "narrow," even as she resisted being considered gendered first and foremost, and even as she recognized a "coming world" that was larger than any potential husband. For all her determination, she found herself sorely tempted by her attractive suitor to diverge from her chosen path. The day after Walter proposed, Charlotte composed a piece she entitled "An Anchor to Windward," listing her "many and good" "[r]easons for living single." Among them she itemized her overarching love of freedom, her longing for a home of her own and for independence, her desire to perform "the thousand and one helpful works which the world needs," and her resistance to being absorbed by what she refers to as "that extended self—a family" (Knight 2: 866-67). At the same time, she acknowledges, if only by the title she gave the piece, the strength of the gusts blowing her in the other direction.

Several of her letters from this time reveal her volatile emotional state as she swung between conceding that it was right for women to marry and asserting that it was wrong for an ambitious woman such as herself to do so. Walter was aware of this volatility, noting in his diary that "contrasts seem to rule in her nature. She is independent, but she likes to nestle by my side and depend on me. She is at the head of the Gymnasium, yet she can be as soft & gentle as a weakly woman . . . " (66). Charlotte's alternating moods suggest that she may have been sequentially trying out the two seemingly discrete roles beckoning her: independent worker versus dependent wife. During their protracted courtship, Charlotte massaged Walter's hopes by agreeing with him that wife-and-motherhood represented a woman's "great work" and by confessing that all the forces of nature were conspiring to lead her down this aisle. But she also countered with scrupulous honesty that as a world worker it was possible she could "do a greater" service. She saw herself as standing at a crossroads, forced to choose between "two lives": the one as woman, the other as worker. And while Walter was strenuously pointing one way, she was drawn to the other. Still, with every tentative step she took in her preferred direction, she acknowledged that she was "crushing [her] heart under foot" (Letters to Charles).

Although in *Women and Economics* and many of her other polemical works she makes light of the effort to combine work and marriage, Charlotte herself could not readily reconcile the two. As she wrote Walter, "my life is not for any *one*, or any *few*; but for as many as I can reach. . . . [M]uch as I love you I love *WORK* better, & I cannot make the two compatible. . . . I am meant to be useful & strong, to help many and do my share in the world's work, but not to be loved" (Stetson 62-63). Just as often, however, her belief that she was unlovable undermined rather than fortified her confident declarations in favor of "*WORK*," leaving her insecure and aching to be comforted. In such moments she had but one desire:

> to turn from my journey wild!
> And throw myself like a tired child
> Into arms that are waiting me. (Gilman, untitled poem)

At her most vulnerable, she wondered aloud if Walter could "fill in [her] life the large place [she] had hoped the world would fill" (Stetson 74). Could serving one man fulfill a woman who had dreamed of serving the world? That, for Charlotte, was the question, one she posed poetically:

> Can I, who suffer from the wild unrest
> Of two strong natures claiming each its due,
> And can not tell the greater of the two;
> Who have two spirits ruling in my breast
> Alternately, and know not which is guest
> And which the owner true. . . . (Knight 2: 882)

Charlotte did not consider herself large enough to encompass what to her were the contradictory spirits of womanly love and world service, believing that one or the other would have to be evicted. But in so framing her dilemma, she ensured that, whatever her choice, she would have cause to miss the former tenant and to wonder if she had mistaken "guest" for "owner true." She also renders fundamentally antagonistic that which, in *Women and Economics,* at least, she suggests must be conciliated in order to achieve the highest happiness.

"Leave me–Leave mother–Leave child–leave all and preach!"

Charlotte married Walter on 2 May 1884 and almost immediately regretted her decision. She believed that marriage had killed her figuratively, that it had killed her soul and stifled that still small voice within which used to tell her the difference between right and wrong. In the parlance of the day, she had opted for a caress over a career, and though she enjoyed the former, she lamented the latter. While her days as a young wife were busy ones, she confessed to being "mortally tired of doing nothing" (Knight 1: 301). While a common side-effect of pregnancy (she had conceived within weeks of the wedding), fatigue registered for Charlotte as the effect not of physiology but of lifestyle—or the lack of a fulfilling one (i.e., "doing nothing"). In short, she equated "women's work" with enervation and emptiness in implicit contrast to the energizing world work that, had she chosen otherwise, might have been her profession.

Casting around for someone to blame for her misery, Charlotte soon settled on the face in the mirror: "Prominent among the tumbling suggestions of a suffering brain was the thought, 'You did it yourself! You did it yourself! You had health and strength and hope and glorious work before you—and you threw it all away. You were called to serve humanity, and you cannot serve yourself. No good as a wife, no good as a mother, no good at anything. And you did it yourself!'" She could at once do nothing, counter her mother's encouragements to "get up and do something," and do nothing but blame herself for what she *had* done, what she had sacrificed (*Living* 91). In a later piece addressing "The Nervous Breakdown of Women," she argued that the body and the spirit must mesh and "[t]he creature must be satisfied with itself, it must do what it likes to do, and like what it does" (203). Neither doing what she liked nor liking what she did, Charlotte, married, was miserable.

Her feeble attempts to rally her spirits focused on meaningful work as a remedy: "Perhaps now I can pick up the broken threads again and make out some kind of career after all" (Knight 1: 329). But her conviction that she had sacrificed any chance of a fulfilling career by marrying—and that she could never combine the two satisfactorily—took a heavy toll. A diary entry from the time reveals the extent of her despair:

> Every morning the same hopeless waking. Every day the same weary drag. To die mere cowardice. Retreat impossible, escape impossible. I let

> Walter read a letter to [my dear friend] Martha in which I tell my grief as strongly as I can. He offers to let me go free, he would do everything in the world for me; but he cannot see how irrevocably bound I am, for life, for life. No, unless he die and the baby die, or he change or I change there is no way out. Well. (Knight 1: 332)

This entry, replete with its drastic fantasy of liberation, reflects Charlotte's belief that loving had ruined rather than enhanced living. Now fully cognizant of his wife's palpable grief and dejection, Walter noted:

> There have been violent hysterical symptoms, and long periods of taciturnity, melancholy, and utter loss of the desire or power to will. . . . [N]either words nor medicine availed much, for her illness brought back all the thoughts of how strong she was before marriage, how much she wanted to do, the remembrance of "her mission" and a fierce rebellion at the existing state of things. Poor dear wife! Since that subject has taken the form of a monomania—a terrible thing that crushes all joy, all enthusiasm and sweetness out of my life. (Stetson 279)

Regret and feelings of entrapment only heightened Charlotte's anguish, compounded by her conviction "that her whole usefulness & real life was crushed out by her marriage and the care of the baby—that she was a useless and a wasted soul" (279). She resented Walter's freedom to work, though he too had a child, a spouse, and a home, and resented the double standard that made this disparity logical. She wanted to live, as she defined it, to work—at the world's work, to use her phrase—but instead she found herself reduced to a domestic drudge, and not even that, since at this point she was virtually helpless around the house.

As Charlotte's melancholy deepened, Walter for the first time "felt that [he] was sorry that [he] had married" and concluded, "I would not marry if I had the chance again, knowing what I do know" (282). His most bitter diary entry was recorded on 11 September 1885:

> My darling wife thinks now that she shall some day preach—sermons about health, morality and the like—from the pulpit on what you will. Ah well, my dearest love, if you have anything to say that will help us, and real solutions to offer for moral problems and the destruction of moral miasma, for God's sake preach! And may you have power beyond all the preachers of all time! Leave me—Leave mother—Leave child—leave all and preach! We need some one to tell us what of all these "truths" *is* truth. Go. God help you! (290)

Charlotte did eventually "leave all and preach," succeeding beyond even her own and certainly Walter's wildest dreams. One thing is clear: both Charlotte and Walter saw her professional goals as antithetical to marriage, so that to pursue them she must of necessity leave those she loved, or at least, those who loved her. And eventually that is precisely what she did.

Looking back on her failed marriage, Charlotte wrote Houghton, "I married *without* that knowledge of right doing. I did not have my own sanction. I did not reason it out and accept it" (12 Mar. 1899). Conveniently forgetting the years of anguished reasoning and vacillating, and even the good times and joy, she concluded in hindsight what she had suspected at the outset of her relationship with Walter: that marriage and the kind of fulfilling work she desired did not "combine."

Loving and Living

Charlotte's experiences during her first marriage helped to inform her arguments on behalf of women's economic independence. They lent vehemence to her conclusion in *Women and Economics* that "the woman in marrying becomes the house-servant, or at least the housekeeper, of the man" (219-20). Yet her distaste for its potential consequences did not render her impervious to the appeals of love, nor did it crush her hope that love and work might somehow be combined. After leaving Walter, Charlotte sought to support herself and her young daughter in California by lecturing, writing, and taking in boarders. Though she had yearned for an economically independent life since a teenager, she found these years of scraping by to be difficult, filled with "Outside work, inside work, heartache, anxiety and debt" (*Living* 151). Her heartache may have stemmed from the slow and uneven pace at which she was realizing her dreams of world service, but it also may have derived from her sorrow over yet another failed relationship. Charlotte met Adeline ("Delle") Knapp shortly before moving from Pasadena to Oakland, and the two women quickly became intimate. As with her first love, Martha Luther, Charlotte believed that in Delle she had found a way to combine loving and living, and that with a woman as life mate she might more easily uphold that combination than she would in a conventional heterosexual marriage. Though skittish about love, Charlotte clearly felt that work could not constitute the be-all and end-all of life. In a poem she wrote for Delle, she rejoiced that work no longer had to serve as her own sole source of fulfillment:

> No more the empty loneliness, the fight
> To live above all loss, for Truth and Right,
> No more the pale cold heart that ached and bled—
> O happy heart! So warmed and kissed and fed!
> I thank thee, God, for sending this delight
> To me at last! (Knight 2: 899)

But she did not rejoice for long in this "delight" (her pet name for Adeline); the relationship soon soured, and, in the end, Charlotte was relieved to "have her go" (Knight 2: 542). Once again love had taught her a bitter lesson: "Out of it all I ought surely to learn final detachment from all personal concerns" (Knight 2: 507). Although she never learned this lesson fully herself, she does realize a detachment from the personal in such works as *Women and Economics*. For by emphasizing the economic side of women's life story and by treating that story in largely impersonal, abstract terms, she barely nods to the "personal concerns" that had for her and countless other women proven so difficult an impediment to the independence she decrees an essential human trait.

In her own life, Charlotte sought to detach herself from personal concerns by leaving California behind and spending the next half-decade without a permanent address, lecturing at home and abroad. It was while on a stopover in New York City in the spring of 1897 that she reintroduced herself to her first cousin Houghton ("Ho") Gilman, who was practicing law in the city. The cousins saw each other frequently throughout that visit and inaugurated a correspondence that grew increasingly amorous. As the relationship heated up, so too did Charlotte's thinking on the "economic basis of [the] woman question," a topic she had been lecturing on since at least the spring of 1890 (Knight 2: 682). In her autobiography, she refers to herself just prior to writing *Women and Economics* as "[f]ull of the passion for world improvement," but around this time she was full of other passions as well (*Living* 235).

Gilman began the first draft of *Women and Economics* on 31 August 1897 and completed it thirty-nine days later, on 8 October. She revised the manuscript twice before submitting the final version to her publisher on 17 January 1898. On her best day she wrote some 4,000 words and then "ran, just raced along the country road, for sheer triumph" (*Living* 235). The exuberance that inspired this run derived from good work well and easily done, but it also may have stemmed from her flourishing love affair.

Charlotte described her life prior to rediscovering Ho as "strange . . . widespread—thin" and saw in her younger cousin the possibility of "the dear sweet joy of home and love" (Knight 2: 847-48). This time around, Charlotte could envision "home and love" as the source of "joy," not sorrow, because Ho was proving quite different from Walter, especially through his willingness to support Charlotte's work. From the first, Ho served as Charlotte's sounding board, first reader, collaborator, and editor. In one of her letters, Charlotte describes Ho as "very near somehow—a kind of background to most of my thinking when I'm not at work" (2 Sept. 1897). In another letter drafted during the heady days of *Women and Economics'* remarkable success, she maintains, "I had to wait till I was 37 and had begun to love you before I ever thought of the economic side of that theory—in its clear fulfillment, that is" (2 Feb. 1899). After its publication, she told Ho on more than one occasion that *Women and Economics* was "our book" (Letters to George, 22 Sept. 1898, 3 Jan. and 16 Feb. 1899). Punning on the title's abbreviation, Charlotte observed that "our book is 'We', isn't it! Of course. No wonder it is so successful. I'll call the next one 'Us'" (16 Feb. 1899). Her decision to cast Ho in the roles of context and co-author further justifies reading *Women and Economics* not only as a manifesto on the necessity of combining loving and living but also as a register of the author's hopes of realizing that combination in her own life soon. As Charlotte wrote Ho in an optimistic moment, "O dearest Heart! To think and work together! If we can do *that* all else will take care of itself" (2 Sept. 1898).

Charlotte had found a helpmate in Ho, a prospective husband who would not only allow her to work but also actively encourage her to do so. It was her (and his) capacity to love that she doubted this time around more than her capacity to work. Now that she was gaining her stride as a world worker, could she also gain the time necessary to maintain a successful relationship? For that matter, did she possess the skills or traits necessary to love and be loved? Throughout the three-year courtship, Charlotte vacillated between the hope that she could discover with Ho a higher love than she had experienced previously and despair over whether she would fail to meet his expectations as a wife—hope that she might at last make room in her life for both work and love and despair that she was not equal to the task. She assured Ho that she was "*not* a nice person to be close to. I do very well at long range. You see . . . I *am* a wreck on that side of me; the inside, the personal side; and you come dreadfully close to it" (12 Oct. 1897). Since she had "never had . . . a satisfied love"—since her previous romantic relationships had for the most part "all gone wrong somehow—like a stopped sneeze!"—she was convinced that her romance with Ho was likewise destined to fail (3 Nov. 1897).

Once again, when it came to courtship Charlotte found it hard to maintain an even keel, giving vent to her "ridiculous emotions" and then repressing them strenuously. She depicted herself as alternately "flopping on" to Ho or "turning away" from him, feeling perpetually as if she had "lost my real balance" as she careened from the hot to "the cold end of the swing" (3 Nov. and 31 May 1897). She personified her heart as "sulky, frightened, discouraged, 'rattled' to a degree; one foot forward and the other back, ready to rush forward in tumultuous devotion one minute, and run away shrieking the next—fingers in ears!" (7 Nov. 1897). When flush with love, she confided to Ho, "[You have] done something to me Houghton dear—I'm not what I used to be at all. The world has wiggled and turned round and has new values. And it's mostly You—just now. Work and Duty are somewhere—they'll wake up again I don't doubt" (3 June 1900). But when work took precedence, Charlotte wondered how she "dare undertake a personal relation—I who am so increasingly demanded by the world. And this will increase rather than decrease. I *cannot* give you all—or even much" (5 Mar. 1899). Only rarely did she experience the kind of equanimity that inspired her to proclaim that she could, however precariously, "dare balance [his love] for a moment with my work!" (20 Feb. 1898). It was more than a year after *Women and Economics* was published that she felt surefooted enough to conclude that it might just be possible "[t]o prove that a woman can love and work too. To resist this dragging weight of the old swollen woman-heart, and force it into place—the world's Life first—my own life next. Work first—love next" (26 July 1899). Yet even here, her idea of balance constitutes more of a ranking, with work taking precedence. What is more, this detente came fairly late in the game. By and large, and especially during the months when she was completing her book, she leaned closer to doubt than to jubilation. Her letters to Ho at this time thus serve as a venue for the fears she never exposed in the confident tract that is *Women and Economics.*

Charlotte's relationship with Walter had taught her how hard it was for a married woman to work without cost to her marriage; her relationship with Ho had not yet persuaded her that a working woman could marry without cost to her work. Thus it was daring of her to propose as the solution to women's ennui and degradation the very path she had so much difficulty navigating herself. Her assertions that work would elevate and fulfill not only married women but also their spouses, and that women's employment would improve marriage along with the world, were based on nothing more than her own dawning hopes, since she had as yet no durable experience to back up her claims. Hence when she concludes in *Women and Economics,* "In reality, we may hope that the most valuable effect of this change in the basis of living [i.e., married women finding meaningful work to do vs. domestic drudgery] will be the cleansing of love and marriage from this base admixture of pecuniary interest and creature comfort . . ." (300), she bases her conclusion less in "reality" than in "hope." She believed with all her heart that women, like men, needed to find meaningful work in order to live a meaningful life; what she was less certain of was whether, once women abandoned domestic drudgery and pursued fulfilling careers, their marriages would survive (hers to this date had not). And yet despite her personal history, throughout *Women and Economics* she boldly asserts that such changes would ensure not only marriage's survival but also its improvement.

One of the ways she felt sure marriage would improve under these new conditions was that husband and wife would meet as equals in all avenues of their intertwined lives, fostering a deeper, stronger union between them. In *Women and Economics* she prophesies that marriage will not be "perfect unless it is between class equals. There is no equality in class between those who do their share in the world's work in the largest, newest, highest ways and those who do theirs in the smallest, oldest, lowest ways" (220). As it stood presently, men's professional life trumped women's domestic life, creating a hierarchy that pervaded and polluted all aspects of marriage. Since she bristled under this hierarchy while married to Walter, one would think she would strive for utter equality in her new relationship with Ho. Instead, she often played a subservient role and seldom let it trouble her. Occasionally, she did worry that instead of bringing out "what is best and strongest" in her, Ho brought out "all that is worst and weakest.... It makes me unreasonable—sensitive—disagreeable—absurd. It makes me want to be petted and cared for—me!" (12 Oct. 1897). More often, however, and even while positing marital equality as an ideal in *Women and Economics,* she beseeched Ho to treat her like a dependent creature and confessed to enjoying such treatment mightily.

Although seven years Ho's senior and by far the more ambitious of the two, Charlotte looked to Ho as her protector and savior. She writes:

> I suppose this is very foolish—but I can't bear to let go of you.... You seem so solid and firm and permanent somehow—and I feel so wobbly and in the dark.... Through all the bucks and plunges of my recently misbehaving brain... I temporarily cuddle down and clutch you remorselessly. Later on I shall flop and wobble again. Later still soar off no doubt. But just for a little time—and with the excellent reason that I can't help it—behold me as it were a sleepy Newfoundland puppy in your overcoat pocket! (4 Nov. 1897)

Such an image runs counter to her theory that once women became economically independent, they would shed their feelings of inferiority along with their emotional dependence on men and meet them on equal ground. But as she confided to Ho, "You don't half realize how much I need you. My notions of not being 'supported' are exclusively economic you see—and by no means let you out of far harder tasks.... O it does feel so good to be carried!" (29 July 1899).

In *Women and Economics,* Gilman insists that fulfilling world work would eliminate women's "intense self-consciousness," the "sensitiveness beyond all need," the demand for "measureless personal attention and devotion," yet her own letters document the persistence of this neediness and suggest that it might even be intensified by the pressures of maintaining a living (280). She turns often to Houghton as to a comforting parental figure, speculating, "I stayed with Walter for a time,—but I was not held.

You hold me. I don't wholly like to be held—and yet I do!" (30 June 1898). His loving attention made her feel "childishly happy . . . young—and pretty—and—desirable. It makes me feel like a child, tucked up and 'put to bed' with all due nursery formalities—the right doll on the pillow—'a drink o' water'—everything. The sense of wide reeling empty darkness changes to a feeling of closeness and warmth and support. I guess its 'the eternal feminine' after all" (10 Nov. 1897). So even as she was revising the work that boldly demanded independence for women in order to develop their human traits and minimize their gendered ones, she was drafting private documents testifying to her abiding "feminine" dependence, a dependence that in her private missives, at least, does not figure as automatically negative.

How do we make sense of this paradox? How do we reconcile Gilman's public and private declarations? Knowledge of her life and work reveal that, for her, woman was a question—and her own life a challenge—because female identity was still wrapped up in the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, and because the process of disentanglement remained so difficult. Charlotte's own experiences in life and love had taught her that what women "want" was "[n]ot love as all of life . . . but love as part of life" ("Is Cupid" 375). As both a lover and a worker, she struggled to ascertain just how big that part should be, fearing that if she gave love too much room it might nudge out all other priorities, but that if she closed the door in its face, loneliness would prevail. While she was writing *Women and Economics,* she was working out both in theory and in practice how much space love and work should occupy in her own and other women's lives. Although *Women and Economics* maps life as capacious enough for both marriage and career, her papers suggest more friction and competition. It was typical of Gilman to parade her ideals before her public and to save her doubts for backstage. Examining both public and private documents together provides us with a more accurate chart of how the foremost feminist theorist of her day not only thought but also felt about the Woman Question. Her poems and letters flesh out the complexities and contradictions of her theories, provide counterpoints to *Women and Economics'* most positive points, and underscore the truth of her contention therein that "the troubles of life as we find them are mainly traceable to the heart or the purse" (25). In *Women and Economics* she argues that these troubles are exacerbated by the conjunction of the heart and the purse, by the expectation that women ought to make their living by loving. Her papers reveal as the treatise does not that there was no simple remedy to this muddle, and that the solution she proposes in *Women and Economics*—combining living and loving without equating them—could prove the most troublesome task of all. In the end, her decision to promote her most vexing personal problem as a solution reflects her fundamental idealism, her belief that making her aspirations public might bring them that much closer to becoming done deeds.

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Notes

[1] There is no protocol for addressing a woman who went by three different surnames in her lifetime. Although calling her "Charlotte" seems not just imprudent but impudent, it solves the problem of naming her vis-à-vis her first and second husbands (whom I also refer to by their first names). On the advice of the journal's editor, I use "Gilman" elsewhere.

[2] Mary A. Hill's volume initially introduced me to Charlotte's correspondence with Houghton and proved a helpful resource when it came time to check quotations for accuracy. In lieu of her excerpted versions of the letters, however, I have relied throughout on the original manuscripts as a way of accessing the correspondence in its entirety. (Permission granted by the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.)

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