The Rape of the Text:
Charlotte Gilman's Violation of *Herland*

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Rape became not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear. His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood.

Susan Brownmiller

Despite her conviction that cooperation should be the guiding principle of social relations, Charlotte Perkins Gilman led a life frequently and deeply rent by conflict. Her personal values contrasted sharply with those held by the public she hoped to educate: a feminist, writer, lecturer, and activist, she agonized over marrying and finally divorced her first husband, gave up her child, and issued vehement protests against the contemporary structure of home, family, and motherhood. Gilman apparently experienced wrenching personal conflict, too. At the birth of her daughter, she sank into a severely debilitating depression. Even death became a struggle for Gilman: suffering from cancer, she chose to take her own life rather than allow herself to be ravaged by the disease.

Gilman's controversial, tempestuous life notwithstanding, her utopian novel *Herland* is considered by most readers to present an exuberantly positive feminist vision of human capability and feminine spirit. Ann J. Lane asserts the visionary and revolutionary power of *Herland* when she writes,

>In Gilman's work it is not the scientist, the warrior, the priest, or the craftsman, but the mother, who is the connecting point from present to future. In her utopia, Charlotte Perkins Gilman transforms the private world of mother-child, isolated in the individual home, into a community of mothers and children in a socialized world. It is a world in which humane social values have been achieved by women in the interest of us all. (Introduction, p. xxiii)

Susan Gubar argues that in *Herland* Gilman sought to "rename and reclaim" the "heart of female darkness" that H. Rider Haggard colonized in his
masculinist novel *She* (1886). For Gubar, *Herland* represents a feminist analysis of masculine attitudes about women, and in Gilman's analysis, both America and masculinity come into question: "The satiric critique generated from the utopian reconfiguration here means that the better Herland looks as a matriarchal culture, the worse patriarchal America seems in contrast."5

Despite feminist encomiums, *Herland* is as deeply complex as Gilman herself. Just as Gilman—a thinker far ahead of her time—lived uneasily in Victorian America, so *Herland*—a novel embodying a potentially transforming, revolutionary vision—existed uncertainly and precariously in the literary landscape of its era. As a work of feminist utopian fiction, *Herland* does, as Gubar suggests, fulfill the "feminist project" of "decentering definitions of the real woman, the total woman, the eternal feminine." But *Herland* undermines that project as well. While Gilman espouses an ideology of expansive, supportive, strong femininity, she violates that vision by the very shape of her novel.

Gubar assures us that one of the primary metaphors of masculine power over the feminine—rape—is subverted in *Herland*. Characterizing the three masculine visitors to Herland, Gubar writes, "Part of what they must discover is that there is no central, secret interior place to penetrate, for there are no mines or caves in *Herland*"; in this way, Gilman re-imagines and reshapes women metaphorically.6 Women do not exist to be entered, conquered, or taken; they exist as agents of their own experience.7

But in fact while Gilman does attempt such a re-imagining of our metaphors for female experience, she violates the message she conveys. By shaping her novel as she does—that is, by centering the narrative on the issue of Terry and Alima's uncertain sexual union and by generating suspense through exploiting the potential violence of that union—Gilman compromises the integrity of her own text. Through Gilman, the masculinist values of the patriarchy impose themselves on the feminist values of the novel. To paraphrase Susan Brownmiller's characterization of rape (cited in my epigraph), Gilman allows patriarchal values "forcible entry" into the feminist body of her text. By means of this forcible entry—or rape—the masculinist values that Gilman abhors enjoy "victorious conquest" over the feminist "body" or ideology of her novel.

In writing *Herland*, in engineering her feminist utopia, Gilman found herself reaching for her life-long goal—"reconstructing in our minds the position of woman under conditions of economic independence"; for Gilman believed that a greater understanding of women's material and social realities would inevitably effect a radical change in those realities.8

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Because human beings are, Gilman argued, “the only animal species in which the female depends on the male for food, the only animal species in which the sex-relation is also an economic relation” (Women and Economics, p. 5), woman had become severely limited in her development (restricted to her status as a “sex-type”), and the institutions of home, family, and motherhood had become perniciously distorted. Gilman’s project involved not simply rescuing women from a restrictive sex-role, but also liberating the larger social structures in order to foster the best in both men and women.

In Herland Gilman sought to convey her belief that “the female is the race type, and the male, originally but a sex type” and further that when “we learn to differentiate between humanity and masculinity we shall give honor where honor is due.”9 Gilman’s skill in foregrounding masculine-centered perceptions becomes obvious when the narrator of Herland observes, as he sees the country for the first time, “why, this is a civilized country! . . . There must be men” (p. 11). Not only does Gilman make Vandyck Jennings’s perspective seem as ludicrously male-centered as it is, but she also calls ironically into question the notion of civilization. As readers, we find ourselves prepared to compare our “masculine” civilization with a new world whose boundaries we have yet to discover.

Gilman created in Herland a society in which women move so far beyond their restricted role as sexual beings that the “inevitable evil consequence” of “excessive indulgence” (Women and Economics, p. 31) in sex is eradicated. Because sex for pleasure’s sake alone has been eliminated from Herland, because the women of Herland are not economically dependent upon men and need not please men, these women have been able to build an egalitarian, sharing community. The effects of their liberation are felt in every area of social interaction, as Ann Lane reveals in her enumeration of the revolutionary ideas of Herland:

- Class equality; some kind of communal child-rearing; absence of privilege by sex; freedom from fear of male violence; elimination of sex-linked work; the mother-child relationship and the idealized home as models for social institutions; and the use of persuasion and consensus to maintain social order. (Introduction, p.xx)

While the women of Herland desire to learn from their visitors, in asking the Americans questions they reveal much about their world. They are shocked to learn of the existence of abortion, of “fathering” and “mothering” (that is, procreating) without adequate birth control; they are appalled by a society that worships a patriarchal, harsh God; they even express dismay at depriving a calf of its mother’s milk. Sometimes the contrasts between the attitudes of the Herlanders and the three men are comical (when, for
instance, Somel asks, “Has the cow no child?” p. 48) and sometimes wrenching (when Somel learns of abortion in America, “Destroy the unborn—! . . . Do men do that in your country?” p. 70). But these comparisons, which the visitors find “odious” and embarrassing, are always educational; they change our minds and our consciousness just as they seem to reshape the narrator’s consciousness about the inevitability or “naturalness” of sex-roles and sexuality as constructed by turn-of-the-century America. As Vandyck explains,

I found that much, very much, of what I had honestly supposed to be a physiological necessity was a psychological necessity—or so believed. I found, after my ideas of what was essential had changed, that my feelings changed also. (p. 128)

Realizing that, as she puts it in The Home: Its Work and Influence, “a concept is a much stronger stimulus to the brain than a fact,”10 Gilman set herself the goal in Herland of changing consciousness, of demonstrating that sex for its own sake (as in prostitution, which Gilman calls “a barren, mischievous unnatural relation, wholly aside from parental purposes, and absolutely injurious to society”) must be “eliminated from human life” (Man-Made World, p. 246). She also urges that the principles of masculinity—“struggle, conflict, and competition”—be replaced by those of femininity—“of growth, of culture, of applying services and nourishment in order to produce improvement.”11 In fact, there is “no sex-feeling” in Herland; society is built upon the principles of motherhood and sisterhood rather than upon artificial sex distinctions: these women, “whose essential distinction of motherhood was the dominant note of their whole culture” (Herland, p. 58), “had no wars. They had no kings, and no priests, and no aristocracies. They were sisters and as they grew, they grew together—not by competition, but by united action” (Herland, p. 60).

As she explained in Women and Economics, Gilman believed that all “human life is . . . open to improvement” (p. 271), and she sought earnestly to foster such improvement, but she was painfully aware of the difficulties she faced in attempting to educate the reading public. In her preface to The Man-Made World she demonstrated her understanding that her “gynaecocentric” view—as she expresses it in that work—might be unacceptable to her audience:

All new scientific discoveries are slow of universal acceptance; and anything so subversive of historic custom as this, involving so complete a change of attitude regarding the relations of the sexes to one another and to Society, cannot be expected to make rapid progress in popular belief. (p. 5)
Gilman’s goal in *Herland*, then, as in all her works, was complicated by the fact that the consciousness she sought to reshape, refocus, refine had been formed by a set of values Gilman wished to undermine. She addressed an audience whose very *Weltanschaung* rendered it deaf to the words she spoke, whose values automatically and unquestioningly contravened those she sought to inculcate. The problem was made more intense by Gilman’s obvious commitment to the needs of her audience; apparently she did not consider it justified to publish works that her audience would not read. When her periodical *The Forerunner* lacked sufficient subscribers to warrant further publication, she abandoned the project, asserting that “it is sociologically incorrect to maintain an insufficiently desired publication.”

Charlotte Gilman thus confronted the problem of language, of representation. How was she to create, discover, or imagine a language for those concepts her culture did not yet recognize? How was she to reshape our understanding of women and thereby the lives of women? Hélène Cixous described just this predicament in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” her consideration of what women’s writings will and must do. Gilman surely would have agreed with Cixous’s first requirement, that “the future must no longer be determined by the past,” and she would have concurred when Cixous points out the near impossibility for the woman writer of “put[ting] herself into the text”:

> Since these reflections are taking shape in an area just on the point of being discovered, they necessarily bear the mark of our time—a time during which the new breaks away from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old (*la nouvelle de l’ancien*). Thus, as there are no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break, what I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project.

Gilman was aware both of the enormous power of literature to shape consciousness and of the immense difficulty of suitting traditional forms of discourse to her radical, transforming purposes. In her essay “Masculine Literature” (collected in *The Man-Made World* in 1911), she made clear her faith in the capacity of the novel to alter human consciousness: “Literature is the most powerful and necessary of the arts, and fiction is its broadest form. . . . The art which gives humanity consciousness is the most vital art” (*Man-Made World*, p. 93).

In the same essay, Gilman anticipates several directions of feminist literary analysis of our own time with her incisive critique of masculinist
literary politics. Fiction in her time, she tells us, is "still restricted, heavily and most mischievously restricted" (p. 94). The mischief-makers who have constrained it and shaped it to their own ends are men—those with political, sexual, and economic as well as literary power. Although, according to Gilman, it is "hard for us to realize this," men have "given the world a masculized literature" (p. 88). Since men care "only for male interests" (p. 92), she goes on, they have shaped and fostered a literature that reflects only their experience; she finds this deplorable: "The art of literature in this main form of fiction is far too great a thing to be wholly governed by one dominant note" (p. 100).

The dominant note in this "masculized literature" makes itself heard in the predominant subject matter of fiction: "the Story of Adventure, and the Love Story" (p. 94). Intent upon uncovering the masculinist biases of literature, Gilman observes wryly that "it is surely something more than a coincidence that these are the two essential features of masculinity—Desire and Combat—Love and War" (p. 95). Gilman asserts here, somewhat surprisingly, that even the love story, supposedly the domain of scribbling women and impressionable girls, serves patriarchal ends in that "it is the story of the pre-marital struggle. It is the Adventures of Him in Pursuit of Her—and it stops when he gets her!" (p. 96).

Gilman's radical insight into the politics of literary production continues as she points out that women, as rendered in literature, are no more than projections of patriarchal fantasy or desire: "Woman's love for man, as currently treated in fiction is largely a reflex; it is the way he wants her to feel, expects her to feel. Not a fair representation of how she does feel" (p. 98). Anticipating Cixous's condemnation of the publishing establishment—"Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women—female-sexed texts. That kind scares them"—Gilman asks where women's literature is. She wonders where woman has written woman:

What has literature, what has fiction to offer concerning mother-love, or even concerning father-love, as compared to this vast volume of excitement about lover-love? Why is the search-light continually focused upon a two or three years space of life "mid the blank miles round about?" Why indeed, except for the clear reason, that on a starkly masculine basis this is his one period of overwhelming interest and excitement. (Man-Made World, p. 98)

In her effort to reshape the consciousness of her audience, then, Gilman faces the force of a preeminently masculine and powerful literary tradition: "it is no swift and easy matter to disabuse the race mind from attitudes and habits inculcated for a thousand years. What we have been fed upon so long we are well used to, what we are used to we like, what we like we think is good
and proper" (p. 103). She faces, as she also realizes, the power of the literary canon, those texts enshrined and held inviolable by those with power:

It is difficult for men, heretofore the sole producers and consumers of literature; and for women, new to the field, and following masculine canons because all the canons were masculine; to stretch their minds to a recognition of the change which is even now upon us. (Man-Made World, p. 103)

Gilman further points out that those infrequent appearances of a more fully human literature are often violated by an ignorant reading public and short-sighted publishers. Ironically, the compromise to integrity she sees forced upon Edward Noyes Westcott's popular American novel of 1898, David Harum: A Story of American Life, is the same distortion she imposes upon her own Herland:

our minds are so filled with heroes and heroes continually repeating the one-act play, that when a book like David Harum is offered the publishers refuse it repeatedly, and finally insist on a "heart-interest" being injected by force. (Man-Made World, pp. 103–04)

Gilman's language here ("injected by force") reveals her awareness that the demands of the literary establishment impose themselves unrelentingly upon those works that offer a fresh vision, a new voice, a female-sexed text. This unrelenting demand lies at the center of Gilman's difficulty with Herland. Gilman admitted that language might be inadequate to convey new consciousness, "we have not in our minds the concept, much less the word, for an over-masculized influence" (Man-Made World, p. 89), and yet she called for a new literature that would lead to a reshaped consciousness and broader understanding of life and of human nature:

The art of fiction is being re-born in these days. Life is discovered to be longer, wider, deeper, richer, than these monotonous players of one tune would have us believe.

The humanizing of woman of itself opens five distinctly fresh fields of fiction. (Man-Made World, pp. 104–05)

But if she sought new fields of fiction in Herland, Gilman failed, for her sentence, her novel, her ideology become corrupted. She could not banish patriarchal conceptual structures from her writing. While Gilman's Herlanders deconstruct the patriarchal ideology of marriage, sex, motherhood, love, and education, Gilman herself reconstructs that ideology in the shape of her novel. According to Ann Lane, one of the enlightening aspects of Herland is the manner in which we as readers discover how "sex-oriented" our
culture is. By contrast, she asserts, *Herland* lacks such emotional relations between the sexes: "Sexual tension, which is the backdrop for male-female relations, even ostensibly non-sexual ones, has no reality in Herland" (Introduction, p. xvi). In fact, however, it is just these tensions that impel the narrative movement of Gilman's novel.

Gilman's ideas about the ethics and the shaping power of language are central to *Herland*; she makes aesthetics a political issue in this depiction of a matriarchal utopian community. The triumph of her utopia is, of course, that *Herland* thrives, that humanity exists without war, conflict, rape, or misery; as the narrator explains, the "miracle" (p. 56) of the country is that the most basic and physical of the life processes, birth, occurs without men, and without men the other aspects of life in Herland take on a loving, "maternal," non-violent cast. This feminized attitude toward life extends to the creative efforts of the Herlanders, and in describing these efforts Gilman offers her view of a more moral, more instructive, more humane literature befitting the visionary structure of her new society.

Terry is the first to criticize the literature of Herland. When he and his companions begin to read the Herlanders' writings, their hosts offer them children's books. Terry finds them boring and calls the stories "pretty punk literature" (p. 44). Using much the same analysis she applied in "Masculine Literature" to the state of the American literary establishment, Gilman makes it clear that Terry finds the literature of Herland unsatisfactory because it does not speak to his life or interests—romance, adventure, and men. "Can't expect stirring romance and wild adventure without men, can you?" the narrator asks (p. 44).

But even at this point early in the novel, Gilman's problems with her visionary literary principles become obvious. Her own novel is peopled with men; probably because the shape of utopian fiction requires some contrast between what is and what is imagined, she cannot delineate Herland without characterizing its relation to men.

Vandyck goes on to explain his view of the relationship between fiction and life in Herland when he observes, "There were no adventures because there was nothing to fight" (p. 49). The art and literature of Herland lack the tensions and brutalities of the narrator's own art and literature because Herland itself has not been condemned to suffer the tensions and brutalities of turn-of-the-century America. But while life in Herland is sweet, the art of the country is vapid—as dull as Terry insists it is. Vandyck concurs when Terry defames Herland's drama:

"I tell you the higher grades of life are reached only through struggle—combat. There's no Drama here. Look at their plays! They make me sick."

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He rather had us there. The drama of the country was—to our taste—rather flat. You see, they lacked the sex motive and, with it jealousy. They had no interplay of warring nations, no aristocracy and its ambitions, no wealth and poverty opposition. (p. 99)

Gilman seems equally incapable of separating human suffering and conflict from good literature. Her novel is built upon conflict and sexual conquest. What is most distressing about Herland is that Gilman intensifies and foregrounds the sexual content of this conflict. Rather than demonstrating to her readers that a novel can exist without a “sex motive” (p. 99), without adventure or romance, Gilman places the issue of sexuality at the heart of Herland. Her animadversions upon masculine fiction and the overly developed “sex motive” notwithstanding, Herland is permeated with aggressive, assaultive, and threatening sexuality. Gilman exploits this sexual tension on every level of her work—in her diction, in her plotting, in her use of suspense and climax, in her characterization.

Gilman renders men, even her sympathetic male characters, as bestial, predatory, and rapacious, and she depicts women as virtuous, determined, and sexually inexperienced. From the first chapter, the question Gilman sets before us is this: will the virtuous, feminine Herlanders resist the unwanted advances of the intruders? Will the three men corrupt Herland, or will Herland’s ideology be maintained? If Gilman were contrasting the values of a capitalistic and a socialistic society or of an industrialized and an agrarian way of life, the conflict of values she describes would not be permeated by the aura of sexuality that so compromises Herland. But ultimately the questions the novel poses involve the outcome of a meeting between the aggressive, masculine adventurer and the nurturant, beautiful feminine object. What, Gilman asks almost seductively, will become of these women at the hands of these men?

When in the opening chapter Terry, Jeff, and Vandyck first hear of “a land of women,” they are “much impressed” because “there was something attractive to a bunch of unattached young men in finding an undiscovered country of a strictly Amazonian nature” (p. 5). Sexual challenge is obvious in Vandyck’s choice of words: the idea of Herland is not compelling or interesting or intriguing—it is “attractive.” The three Americans are not adventurers or fortune hunters or pioneers; they are characterized in terms of their status with respect to women, their sexuality, and their masculine solidarity: “a bunch of unattached young men.” The country itself is virginal, “undiscovered,” and represents an opportunity for the men to demonstrate their virility since it is “Amazonian.” The narrator begins his story by focusing on the women as objects, by dealing with their appearance: “Nobody will ever believe how they looked” (p. 1). Even the adventurers’ relationship to the

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land is conveyed in terms of sexual conflict. The "strange and terrible Woman Land" can be reached only by traveling through an untamed, feminine wild zone: "a dark tangle of rivers, lakes, morasses, and dense forests" (p. 2). The adventurers will, they feel, conquer this feminine wilderness; they will civilize it or they will discover masculine civilization there. The men are, moreover, three scientists who will make sense of the feminine senselessness of this land.

Herland is in ideological and metaphorical terms feminine; its values are matriarchal, sisterly. The intruders are given to patriarchal displays of power, sometimes ludicrous demonstrations of their reputed superior intelligence, and shows of masculinity. Terry contemplates his approaching engagement with the "glittering attractions" of Feminisia by "fingering that impressive mustache of his" (p. 7). In rendering the conflict between Herland and its visitors in sexual terms, Gilman may be demonstrating that her narrator cannot escape the masculinist bias of his own culture, for he tells us at the beginning of his story that he has written from memory—that is, his story is his version only, and the facts may differ greatly from his shaping of them: "This is written from memory, unfortunately. If I could have brought with me the material I so carefully prepared, this would be a very different story" (p. 1). But Gilman exploits the sexual tension inherent in the conflict between masculine and feminine ideologies, and she teases her audience with the threat behind these tensions.

As Vandyck describes Terry's character and attitude toward women, he hints that Terry's conduct will prove offensive to us, although the narrator forebears—out of masculine camaraderie—to comment: "Terry was 'the limit.' Later on—why, of course a man's life is his own, we held, and asked no questions" (p. 9). It is clear from the start that Terry poses a sexual threat to the Herlanders, one that causes the narrator to bring himself up short and to reassert Terry's patriarchal right to behave with women as he desires. Gilman foregrounds Terry's threat consistently throughout the novel until Terry's attempted violation of his wife Alima: "even Alima was patience and tenderness and wisdom personified to the man she loved, until he—but I haven't got to that yet" (p. 124).

As the conflict between the Herlanders and the Americans intensifies, this conflict is rendered metaphorically in two ways. The paradigms for conflict that Gilman uses to structure her novel are the ones she denigrated as "masculinized" in her discussion of the literature of her age; she renders the tensions between the Herlanders and the Americans in terms of war and of love. In effect, she retells the stories that she believed had dominated American literature for too long: the story of war and the story of love converge in Herland in a story that describes the quintessential war between the sexes.
The history of the three Americans’ incursion into Herland is, then, in many ways the archetypal story of war and adventure. They encounter the unknown, they are determined to conquer that unknown, and they need to demonstrate their power over the unknown. It is true that Terry, who most vigorously and intensely maintains this aggressive attitude toward Herland and its denizens, cannot be said to speak for Gilman. But it is also true that without Terry, without his “council of war” (p. 25), without his actual physical battling (he shoots one of the Herland “girls”), there would be no novel. Terry’s repeated assaults on Herland carry the story; they form the action of the novel.

The second important plot Gilman uses to structure and motivate her narrative is the story of courtship. It is not just Terry who conceives of the Herlanders as sexual objects; Gilman uses Terry’s lust for the three young girls he encounters as a way to build tension early in the novel. Just as she organizes much of the action of Herland around the invasion or conquest of Herland by the three Americans, Gilman organizes the emotional development around courtship. Herland becomes, moreover, a love story in which the goal is not simply marriage but more importantly the physical consumption of that marriage. Terry pursues the women of Herland as would any suitor in a moderately racy nineteenth-century domestic novel. His intentions, measured by Herlandian or American standards, are not particularly honorable, and the novel creates a certain anxiety in the reader over whether and exactly how Terry will accomplish his ends.

In Terry’s first encounter with Ellador, Alima, and Celis, he approaches the women as though they were animals to be caught, caged, and subdued: “Have to use bait,” he insists. His bait is that lure traditionally offered to nubile females, jewelry, somewhat vulgar and flashy, in keeping with Terry’s level of taste. Terry, too, is characterized by Gilman as an animal, but he is a predator, hungry and dangerous. Vandyck describes Terry’s initial assault upon the women:

I did not like the look in his eyes—it was like a creature about to spring. I could already see it happen—the dropped necklace, the sudden clutching hand, the girl’s sharp cry as he seized her and drew her in. (p. 16)

Thus, early in the novel, the story of the men’s courtship of the “Gorgeous Girls” (p. 17) of Herland, as Terry calls them, is well on its way to becoming a story of terror. Gilman hints that the rapist lurks in Terry’s heart, and the narrator admits that pushing further into Herland “was unwise of us” (p. 12).

Gilman continues to play upon the anxiety she arouses in her readers concerning this courtship by stressing the increasing sexual frustration the men feel. Because they are rendered helpless by these women, they begin to
feel "like a lot of neuters" (p. 26). When they finally win their lovers and marry them, Terry tries to "put into practice his pet conviction that a woman loves to be mastered" (p. 132). At this point the ideological conflict between America's society and Herland's, the political conflict between colonizer and potential colony, and the sexual conflict between male and resistant female come together. The central questions of the novel coalesce. The ideological question (how does American patriarchal culture stand up to Herland's matriarchal culture?), the political question (will the men dominate Herland and convince the Herlanders to make the "Great Change" from parthenogenesis to bisexuality, p. 89), and the personal question (will the three men be able to convince their wives to have sexual relationships with them?) all become one question: will Terry—the most vehement and insistent of the men—force himself upon Alima? Will he, in fact, do what both Gilman and he have been hinting since the beginning of the novel? Will he rape Alima?

Sexual violence is implied early in Herland. When the Herlanders lock the three men up, Terry's fixation on the young women, his insistence that they be his to woo and win, is revealed by his seemingly inappropriate threat to escape: "Love will find out a way" (p. 34). As readers, we wonder what exactly love has to do with Terry's escape from his prison. After one short encounter, Terry's dangerous obsession with Alima becomes clear:

Terry was moody as the days passed. He seemed to mind our confinement more than Jeff or I did; and he harped on Alima, and how near he'd come to catching her. "If I had—" he would say, rather savagely, "we'd have had a hostage and could make terms." (p. 30)

Gilman breaks Terry's speech interestingly here; she leaves us in the air for a moment, wondering, "if he had... then what?" Terry believes that his gift of sex—whether he forces it on the women or not—will allow the men to be "hailed as deliverers" (p. 26), who have rescued these women from their state of sexual deprivation and ignorance. Frustrated and disappointed, he complains later: "They don't know the first thing about Sex" (p. 134).

As the Herland women attempt to educate these three men in the civilized ways of their matriarchy, the men try to educate their wives in the dubious pleasures of non-procreative sex. The Herlanders are, quite reasonably, confused by mating "except in the mating season" (p. 126), and Ellador asks Vandyck, "when people marry, they go right on doing this in season and out of season, with no thought of children at all?" (p. 127). While the narrator finds himself at a loss to explain his position to Ellador, Terry sweeps these reasonable objections aside, "We'll teach 'em!" (p. 119)—a telling phrase in that it promises education while it threatens assault.
Gilman’s use of language with respect to Terry intensifies the sexual content of the conflict she describes. She points out that Terry, unsupported in Herland by a patriarchy that victimizes unprotected women, cannot easily pair off with Alima: “of course, if she was a stray female in a country of pairing ants, he might have had his way with her” (emphasis added, p. 123). The narrator refers threateningly to Terry’s “black fury” and promises to reveal more of Terry’s “special troubles later” (p. 123). With Terry and Alima, courtship and war come together, love and battle converge: “He wanted to take her by storm”; he wanted to “sweep her off her feet with a dashing attack” (p. 93). Terry has been “past master” (p. 93) in the business of wooing women, and he claims that the only problem with these women is that they’ve “never been mastered” (p. 94).

The conflation of the language of love and the language of war discloses Gilman’s attitude toward Terry and by implication toward the patriarchy. The masculine obsession with that “one wish” (p. 129) upon which men seem to focus their energies is rendered as superfluous and violent as competition, war, and barbarous inhumanity. Vandyck discovers, as Gilman hopes we do, that sex for non-procreative purposes is not the “physiological necessity” (p. 128) he imagined it to be, that he can live with and love Ellador on different terms. Vandyck thus can end all aspects of the conflict in Herland by acquiescing—as he does—to the Herlandian view of human sexual and affectional relations. But Terry, probably in Gilman’s view more quintessentially male and thoroughly American than Vandyck, cannot and will not be educated by the Herlanders. As Vandyck describes Terry, he sounds much like the typical American hero: “I always liked Terry. He was a man’s man, very much so, generous and brave and clever” (p. 9). Gilman has structured her novel around Terry’s struggles with the Herlanders, struggles that end in that most base and inhuman weapon in the war between the sexes—rape.

When Terry attempts to rape Alima, his action does not simply demonstrate the violence and cruelty with which he imposes on the Herlanders a brutal, patriarchal world view. His act also uncovers the shameful secret at the heart of Gilman’s novel: that, her feminist ideology notwithstanding, this story is almost exclusively impelled by the “sex-motive”; she cannot, it seems, satisfy her narrative requirements without violating her own ideologies. When Terry “by sheer brute force, in all the pride and passion of his intense masculinity... tried to master this woman,” Gilman asserts the power of the Herlanders: “It did not work” (p. 132). In the ideological conflict, the women—the Herlanders, the matriarchy—triumph. But Terry’s power hangs over the novel like a poisonous cloud. He may not have raped Alima, but by virtue of the fact that Herland is his story—a story of war and of love—he has been party to Gilman’s rape of her own text. Although Terry
can be banished from Herland, he cannot be banished from Herland. The novel cannot exist without him; there would be no story to tell without his threatened and attempted violation of his wife.

Given Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s life-long devotion to the cause of feminism and given her fierce rejection of patriarchal values in literature as well as in life, one is left finally with the puzzling question: what caused Gilman to renounce in her shaping of Herland the ideology of nonviolence, the veneration of cooperation over competition she seemed to promote in that book? Why are the males in the novel ideologically unsexed, their consciousness revealed as a congeries of erroneous masculinist preconceptions, only to be fictionally and formally resexed by the action of the novel? Why finally could Gilman not tell a story that moved her beyond the “masculinized” literature she professed to deplore?

Gilman seems unable to conceive of or to articulate a fresh vision of the sexes. Her novel cannot, as she insisted good fiction must, “teach us life easily, swiftly, truly; teach not by preaching but by truly re-presenting” (Man-Made World, p. 101). While Gilman denounces the American view that life and literature are competitive struggles, she demonstrates that she could not write fiction without sustaining that masculinist world view. Rape—the most odious form of masculine brutality—is venerated in Herland by the textual power Gilman gives the act. It is the driving force of the novel, the source of motivation, tension, and ultimately and tragically audience interest. Gilman leads us to the attempted rape as seductively as a pornographic film or novel leads to such scenes of violation and denigration of the female. Gilman teases, threatens, and compels her audience with Terry’s implied violence and Alima’s supposed vulnerability.

Gilman was, as we have observed, acutely aware of the character and needs of her audience. It was perhaps this sensitivity to her readers that led her to so compromise her own vision. In a consideration of verisimilitude and women’s fiction, Nancy K. Miller discusses the political implications for the woman writer of the existence of audience. Miller points out that plausibility is a necessary precondition for “the stamp of approval of public opinion” and that art must be more “realistic,” more predictable, than life itself: the audience believes that “art should not imitate life but reinscribe received ideas about the representation of life in art.” According to Miller our response to any text depends on our ability to discern within that text a validation of our own socially constructed world view: “the critical reaction to any given text is hermeneutically bound to another preexistent text: the doxa of socialities.”

Herland is a plausible novel. As Gilman has set up her work, it is believable
and expected that Terry—given that he is male, given that he has been shaped by the social and psychological forces of nineteenth-century America, given that he represents the archetypal American hero—vigorously seeks a sexual relationship with Alima. But, as Miller points out (quoting from Gerard Genette's analysis of "Vraisemblance et motivation"), "what defines plausibility is the formal principle of respect for the norm."16 By conforming to the conventions of both the courtship and the adventure stories, whose conventions she argues with on ideological grounds, Gilman inadvertently signals her obeisance to the inevitability of those conventions.

In a consideration of literary conventions, Jean Kennard offers an analysis of the influence of extraliterary experience upon our responses to literary conventions; her attempt to account for change in literary convention sheds light on Gilman's inability to conjoin literary form smoothly with political vision. As Kennard puts it, "literary conventions change when their implications conflict with the vision of experience of a new interpretive community."17 In Gilman's own time, literary convention may not have proved sufficiently elastic to allow her to depict the matriarchal society she envisioned in a way that reflected and validated that ideology. Gilman may have found herself, in her insistence that we write a new story, a woman's story, an interpretive community of one. Her singularity of vision would not have been enough to sway her audience to a new set of literary standards; she conformed instead to a set of conventions that compromised her convictions.

Gilman's inability to adapt the literary conventions of her time to her fiction may not be restricted to her novel Herland. Annette Kolodny asserts that the failure of Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" to establish itself as firmly a part of the American canon as do Poe's stories (which she contends resemble Gilman's) may be in part a consequence of the fact that no interpretive community existed competent to read the story:

In one sense, by hinting at an audience of male readers as ill-equipped to follow the symbolic significance of the narrator's progressive breakdown as was her doctor-husband to diagnose properly the significance of his wife's fascination with the wallpaper's patternings; and by predicking a female readership as yet unprepared for texts which mirrored back, with symbolic exemplariness, certain patterns underlying their empirical reality, "The Yellow Wallpaper" anticipated its own reception. For insofar as writing and reading represent linguistically-based interpretive strategies—the first for the recording of a reality (that has, obviously, in a sense, already been "read") and the second for the deciphering of that recording (and thus also the further decoding of a prior imputed reality)—the wife's progressive descent into madness provides a kind of commentary upon, indeed is revealed in terms of, the sexual politics inherent in the manipulation of those strategies. We are presented at the
outset with a protagonist who, in the course of accommodating herself to that deprivation, comes more and more to experience herself as a text which can neither get read nor recorded.18

Whereas in "The Yellow Wallpaper" Gilman rejects literary convention for the sake of her narrative and for the integrity of her vision, in Herland she bows to her readership and offers a distortion or perversion of her original utopian novel. In this way she compromises the revolutionary effect of her vision.

In Herland, we may view Gilman herself as the victim of her place, her time, her literary context. We may see this novel not so much as a failure of vision as an index to the limitations of the discourse in which she lived, wrote, experienced. As Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer observe (in their discussion of violence against women), we must be aware of "the extent to which our reality is bounded by discourse."19 Cameron and Frazer argue that the sexually motivated serial killer is a product of an intensely misogynist social context, that such crimes enact prevalent attitudes. In a similar way, Gilman's violence against her own work reenacts both the social attitudes toward women and the aesthetic attitudes toward texts that she consciously sought to undermine.

In her discussion of feminist utopian fiction, "Coming Home," Carol Pearson claims that

feminist utopias do away with the division between the inhumane marketplace and the humane hearth. This is not accomplished by moving both men and women out into a brutal public world. Instead, the entire society is patterned after the principles which (ideally) govern the home.20

Superficially Herland does seem to bear out such a generalization. But in fact the patriarchal laws of power and dominance govern Herland as surely as they rule the society in which it was published and read. In this society rape is, as Susan Brownmiller puts it, "man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear."21 While Pearson may claim that "metaphors of birth" shape feminist utopian fiction,22 the metaphors that shape Herland obliterate its impact; those metaphors are metaphors of rape.

NOTES

2 Mary A. Hill enumerates the conflicts in Gilman's life and writing and traces many of the theoretical contradictions in Gilman's work to her life, in "Charlotte


4 *Herland* was written in 1915 and published serially in Gilman’s feminist and socialist monthly, *The Forerunner*. It was not republished prior to Ann J. Lane’s 1979 edition (see Lane, pp. v–vi). Further references to the Lane edition of *Herland* will appear parenthetically in the text.


6 Gubar, p. 142.

7 Carol Pearson also emphasizes the challenge feminist utopian fiction makes to prevailing metaphorical and real aspects of women’s experience, which victimize or denigrate women. Like Gubar, she observes that the women of *Herland* are free from violation of any kind: “Violence, coupled with a desire to master others, is antithetical to a feminist utopian vision. . . . feminist utopias allow citizens to control their own lives. These women are free from the rape of their minds as well as their bodies,” “Coming Home: Four Feminist Utopias and Patriarchal Experience,” in *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Marleen S. Barr (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1981), p. 64.

8 Gilman, *Women and Economics*, p. 270. All further references to this work are made parenthetically within the text.

9 Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World or, Our Androcentric Culture* (New York: Charlton, 1911), p. 5. All further references to this work are made parenthetically within the text.

10 Gilman, *The Home*, p. 62. All further references to this work are made parenthetically within the text.


14 Cixous, p. 877.
16 Miller, p. 36.
20 Pearson, pp. 64–65.
22 Pearson, p. 70.