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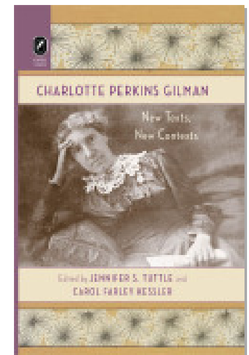
4. An “Absent Mother”



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An "Absent Mother"

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Mag—Marjorie, *and the Politics of Maternal Responsibility*

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As many scholars have found, Gilman throughout her fiction and nonfiction advocated measures to liberate women from the constant responsibilities of childcare through the creation of "baby-gardens," where trained professionals could nurture children throughout the day while mothers pursued their professions. Though Gilman's scenarios of outsourced and specialized childcare were often considered shocking in her own era, they are a testament to her prescience in largely having been actualized today, though Gilman would likely praise some parts of their application and criticize others. More problematic, however, is the idea of long-term maternal separation from a child, which reflects Gilman's own life in her 1894 choice to send her nine-year-old daughter to live with her ex-husband and his fiancée (also her best friend) so that Gilman could focus on her growing professional opportunities. In her fiction, Gilman was more reluctant to portray such a controversial example of what she saw as maternal sacrifice for "world work." Nonetheless, a striking instance of such separation occurs in Gilman's 1912 novel, *Mag—Marjorie*. Related to *Mag—Marjorie* are Gilman's discussions elsewhere of maternal responsibility and childcare, from her optimistic commentaries on ideal motherhood and "social" parenting (from her well-known 1915 novel *Herland* to her underexamined 1900 manifesto, *Concerning Children*), to her admittedly idealistic and selective representation of motherhood in her autobiography, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins*

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Gilman (1935), to other personal writings that are sometimes at odds with such optimism.

In *Mag—Marjorie,* Gilman treats maternal separation from children in ways that both parallel and contrast with her discussions of this issue elsewhere in her oeuvre while underscoring Gilman's own complicated relationship with maternal absenteeism. In doing so, this underdiscussed novel merits further consideration within Gilman's canon, especially in its dialogue with her better known and more unequivocal praise of what she termed "the New Motherhood." Furthermore, Gilman's novel has continued relevance in dramatizing both the fundamental premise of her approach to childcare—that a good mother is, in fact, one who must often be absent in the service of "world work"—and the often-critical popular response to that premise in her own era. Her novel anticipates the recent resurgence of such debate through the media-fueled phenomenon known as the "Mommy Wars" at the turn of the twenty-first century, as well as discussion about whether today's mechanisms for short-term separation live up to the ideal Gilman envisioned. In introducing, if not fully exploring the consequences of, complicated choices about mothering that the heroine makes in *Mag—Marjorie,* Gilman raised questions about the politics of maternal responsibility that are still being debated today.

Gilman published *Mag—Marjorie* serially in *The Forerunner* throughout 1912, a year in which, while continuing her public lecturing, she also published such standard Gilman fare in her self-authored and -published magazine as the satirical essay "Improving on Nature," the utopian sketch "Maidstone Comfort," and "An Innocent Girl," one of her several stories that revised the "fallen woman" archetype. However, Gilman did not reissue this novel separately under her personal Charlton imprint as she did with several other *Forerunner* serializations.[1] *Mag—Marjorie,* a classic example of Gilman's ideologically driven and culturally significant (if not aesthetically meritorious) fiction, intertwines her pervasive theme of redeemed "fallen women" with the ideology of Social Hygiene. That movement, which attempted to eliminate venereal disease by abolishing prostitution, by educating the public on sexual health, and by advocating sexual continence, shared the interest of members of the concurrent eugenics movement in "race betterment." As shown by the existence of the American Social Hygiene Association (led by Harvard President Emeritus Charles W. Eliot), it had widespread support in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1914 Eliot addressed the Association, acknowledging American society's tendency to ignore or deny the problem of sexual vice and its consequences, yet asserting that "[i]n the light of

present knowledge these policies of silence and inaction are no longer justifiable" (Eliot 2). Eliot's vision of the need for frankness about and scientific understanding of this problem aligns him with Gilman's recurrent interest in it, particularly the importance of education in order to foster women's choosing of "fit" (e.g., sexually continent and thus healthy) men as husbands and potential fathers.

In *Mag—Marjorie,* Margaret Wentworth, a sixteen-year-old New England country girl, is seduced and impregnated by unscrupulous medical doctor Dick Armstrong, ten years her senior.[2] Enter Mary Yale, an independently wealthy social worker in the vein of recurrent character Benigna MacAvelly and other female mentors in Gilman's fiction.[3] Miss Yale saves Margaret by fabricating her drowning, taking her abroad and, after the birth of her baby, putting Margaret through nine years of medical school and much cultural refinement in the cities of Europe. The young woman returns to New England triumphant as the esteemed Dr. Margaret Yale, rebuffs the new advances of Dr. Armstrong, who does not recognize the object of his previous conquest, and enjoys the happy ending of marriage to the sympathetic and sexually continent Dr. Henry Newcome. The downside of Gilman's characteristically optimistic narrative is Margaret's relationship with her daughter Dolly (or Dorothea), from whom she separates during her nine years of medical school, leaving her in the care of a loving surrogate family. She sees her daughter only during summer breaks, and even then under the guise of an adopted older sister.[4] Even at the end of Gilman's novel, when Newcome learns of Dolly's true identity and is willing to accept her as an adopted daughter, whether Margaret will publicly acknowledge her motherhood is uncertain, as she is anxious to establish herself professionally in Boston and thereby be an example to other women. Indeed, while Margaret's separation from her child in order to attend medical school is primarily an answer to Gilman's recurrent question of how mothers can share the burden of child-rearing in order to pursue professions, the heroine's choice (along with their fabricated sisterly relationship) is also the solution Gilman provides here to the stigma of so-called "illegitimate" motherhood.

The novel's treatment of maternal responsibility and absence is especially intriguing in light of Gilman's other creative work on this subject. In her first poetry volume, *In This Our World* (1893), the poem "Baby Love" dramatizes the conflict between public work and childcare responsibilities through the allegorical figures of Mother Life, "hard at work" (1.2) and Baby Love, "very lively, very loud" (1.6), describing how Mother must "set her arm" across Baby's path, and concluding:

Baby Love wept loud and long,
But his mother's arm was strong.
Mother had to work, she said.
Baby Love was put to bed. (1.9–12)

On the other hand, Gilman presents positive examples of short-term maternal separation from children in order to pursue rewarding work in several of her *Forerunner*-era stories, including "A Garden of Babies" (1909) and "Making a Change" (1911), wherein she presents fictionalized versions of the "baby gardens" she advocated in *Concerning Children.* She also asserts that the entrepreneurial heroine of her first novel, *What Diantha Did* (1910), is happily able to work after the birth of her child because of having a "cool, airy nursery" (and nursemaid) in the hotel compound she operates, so she can visit her baby throughout the day (184). In an interesting innovation upon the initial scenario of Gilman's best-known story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper," her 1916 tale "Joan's Defender" concerns a "broken," neurasthenic mother exhausted by childcare duties, who in this case is advised by her doctor brother to give up her daughter for a time. Nine-year-old Joan (the same age as Katharine was when Gilman sent her daughter east) is sent to California with her kind uncle, and among his brood of children she blossoms under a regime of physical exercise, unconditional love, and intellectual vigor. Since Joan returns to her parents after "nearly two years" (321) a stronger and far happier child, the tale implies that the separation was deeply beneficial for both mother and daughter. However, none of Gilman's other published works envision so long-term a relinquishing of one's child (and, to some degree, its aftermath), so reminiscent of Gilman's own life, as that presented in *Mag—Marjorie.*

This novel, in its consideration of extended maternal absence, also constitutes a provocative counterpart to Gilman's manifesto of ideal parenting practices, *Concerning Children,* the next book she wrote after her career-making volume, *Women and Economics* (1898). In 1900 Gilman published *Concerning Children* and settled in Manhattan with her newlywed husband Houghton, where they welcomed Katharine, then fifteen years old, after six years of separation. Indeed, Gilman dedicated this volume to Katharine. In many ways, *Concerning Children* anticipates Gilman's public debate on motherhood with Swedish feminist Ellen Key (1849–1926). As a "humanist feminist" (though she preferred the term "humanist" alone), Gilman minimized difference between the sexes and emphasized woman's role as a human being.[5] Consequently she came to advocate social parenting mechanisms such as baby gardens to allow women to perform "human work" that would

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benefit society at large. Author of *Century of the Child* (1909), Key—known as a "female feminist"—instead emphasized sex differences and the feminine role of women, believed motherhood to be women's highest calling, and advocated state support for mothers and children. Gilman, in a somewhat contradictory fashion, also often referred to motherhood as women's highest calling (indeed, it is the position of ultimate respect and veneration in her 1915 utopia *Herland*) and sometimes praised Key's work, such as the latter's critique of patriarchal marriage. However, she differed with Key on the critical issue of women's work, celebrating their presence in the public sphere at the same time as Key decried it and elevating the notion of social or surrogate parenting to facilitate that work at the same time as Key advocated the reign of mothers in the private home.[6]

Concerning Children, the fullest expression of Gilman's theories of good mothering, laid the groundwork for her debate with Key. The text is unfortunately marred by prejudices that indicate Gilman's sympathies with Progressive-era eugenic thinking, as she favorably contrasts the "stock" value of a "sturdy English baby" to that of a "Fuegian" and asserts, "The progress of humanity must be recorded in living flesh. Unless the child is a more advanced specimen than his father and mother, there is no racial improvement" (4). Furthermore, *Concerning Children* adheres to a distanced, theoretical perspective on parenting, perhaps in a bid to sound as expert and academic as possible for readers while also reducing the potential criticism of those who had lambasted Gilman as an "unnatural mother" in 1894. Indeed, she most often speaks of "the child" in an abstract sense and never admits of her own personal experiences as a parent. However, her discussion of parenting and of child psychology in this text is indeed ahead of its time, as Cynthia J. Davis has observed ("*Concerning*" 110). For example, Gilman stresses that parents obsessed with their children's blind obedience set their own interests above those of their children. Instead she emphasizes developing the child's own sense of "judgment and will" (39) and argues, "A human creature is a self-governing intelligence, and the rich years of childhood should be passed in the guarded and gradual exercise of those powers" (40). Also, Gilman champions what would now be called experiential learning in asserting, "What we should do is to help the child to question and find out—teach him [*sic*] to learn, not to believe" (56). Gilman moreover decries corporal punishment, noting that this method teaches children merely to associate the physical abuse received with being detected, and thus not to understand the reasons why a behavior is unacceptable.

Perhaps most presciently, in chapter XIV—"Mothers: Natural, Unnatural"—from *Concerning Children,* Gilman also describes communal childcare

and what she calls "social parenting," concepts introduced in *Women and Economics*. This chapter contrasts conventional and progressive views of motherhood, confounding notions of the "Natural" in order to champion the so-called "Unnatural Mother's" liberation, through high-quality childcare, to perform uplifting "world-work." Of course, the title of this chapter also echoes the term with which Gilman was vilified in the press after her choice to send Katharine to Walter and Grace, and it recalls the title of her 1895 story, "An Unnatural Mother," that champions a woman who prioritizes her role as a "world worker" over her role as a private mother.[7] In this chapter of *Concerning Children,* Gilman's view of outsourced childcare, as well as of the mother's separation from her child, is unfailingly rosy. She asserts that the proud and loving working mother "is not worried" about her child and knows "no weariness, no anxious uncertainty" (272), for the child is in the hands of well-trained specialists, and she concludes decisively that "this unnatural mother has her child in her own care for sixteen hours out of the twenty-four, and during the eight hours of a working day she herself places him [*sic*] in what she knows to be better conditions than her own home could offer" (273). And indeed, her point that high quality childcare will not harm children and may better socialize them or prepare them for school is borne out by current research on childcare.[8] Nonetheless, Gilman's vision does not admit of the challenges that do arise in the pursuit of daycare for young children, as current research has also documented: frequent sickness through exposure to other children; the sometimes prohibitive expense; or even the unavailability of a suitable establishment in the first place.[9]

Testifying to Gilman's abiding concern with this subject, discussion of the benefits of surrogate or social mothering also occurs in Gilman's well-known utopian novel, *Herland* (1915). In the all-female society of the novel, motherhood is considered the noblest calling, the "highest social service," one that is in fact disallowed to "those held unfit" (69). Moreover, child-rearing in Herland is an expert profession, and young children are assiduously cared for in "baby gardens" by specially trained caregivers. As one of the citizens, Somel, explains to the novel's narrator, Herland visitor Van Jennings, "The care of babies involves education, and is entrusted only to the most fit. . . . [C]hild-rearing has come to be with us a culture so profoundly studied, practiced with such subtlety and skill, that the more we love our children the less we are willing to trust that process to unskilled hands—even our own" (83). Within the Herland system, a new mother enjoys a year of constant contact with her baby, but after that is able to pursue her own profession, though "never far off . . . and her attitude toward the co-mothers, whose child-service was direct and continuous, was lovely to see" (103).

Van, himself a "rational" sociologist, is at first quite skeptical of this scheme, inadvertently illuminating the prejudices of his own society in reacting with "cold horror" to the notion of "[separating] mother and child" (83). However, underscoring this new paradigm of childcare is the conviction that it does not deprive the mother of her baby, but rather enriches both the child and its bond with its mother, as Somel reassures Van: "It is her baby still—it is with her—she has not lost it. But she is not the only one to care for it. There are others whom she knows to be wiser. She knows it because she has studied as they did, practiced as they did, and honors their real superiority" (83). Spending significant time among the children and youth of Herland, Van is eventually fully convinced of the success of this system, acknowledging the pervasive happiness, intelligence, and vigor of the people that it produces: "As I looked into these methods and compared them with our own, my strange uncomfortable sense of race-humility grew apace" (104). His eyes thus opened to the benefits of this scheme, Van ultimately even feels "a crushing pity for [his] own childhood, and for all others that [he] had known" (107).

Such discrepancies between idealized, abstract notions of maternal separation and surrogate parenting and the difficult realities they may engender are amplified when one moves from the short-term separations Gilman theorizes and advocates in works such as *Concerning Children* and *Herland* to the long-term separation from her own daughter that, like her heroine in *Mag—Marjorie,* Gilman chose to make. She had considered transferring Katharine to the care of Walter as early as 1891 but did not do so until May of 1894; as Gilman recalls in *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman,* the city of San Francisco, where she had a work opening, was "unsuitable for a child," so she finally sent Katharine (accompanied by her grandfather) east to Walter and Grace, who were married a month later. Gilman asserts that her decision to send Katharine to the latter's father "seemed the right thing to do," adding that "[n]o one suffered from it but myself" and that Katharine thereby received "advantages I could never have given her" (163). However, Gilman confesses that, while writing about this parting thirty years later, "I have to stop typing and cry as I tell about it. There were years, years, when I could never see a mother and child together without crying. . . . I used to make friends with any child I could so as to hold it in my arms for a little" (163–64).

Moreover, though Gilman's autobiography presents her young daughter's acceptance of the arrangement with great equanimity, both Ann J. Lane's and Mary A. Hill's biographies of Gilman, on the strength of first-person interviews with the elderly Katharine herself, argue that the daughter was

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deeply and lastingly wounded by her mother's decision to send her to Walter and Grace. Furthermore, Katharine registered resentment toward her mother in an unpublished autobiography and in letters to historian Carl Degler, in which she asserts that she was often raised by others even while living in California, due to her mother's "nervous prostration."[10] These letters contain an account in multiple drafts of the 1894 separation, expressing resentment for being "dumped" on Grace that also surfaced in the Hill and Lane interviews.[11]

And indeed other materials from Gilman's own life contradict her largely positive representation of sending Katharine to Stetson and Channing—admitting the pain it caused her yet justifying this act in the larger scheme of her life's achievement while assuring readers that her daughter only benefited from this choice. A 3 May 1896 letter from Gilman to Grace Channing Stetson describes how allowing herself to think of Katharine brought on enormous pain; speaking metaphorically, she confessed, "I opened the door a little and looked in. [Might] as well pluck at an amputation! It began to bleed and ached and I hasted [*sic*] and shut it again."[12] Another letter to Houghton in 1898 characterizes Gilman's sense of loneliness, revealingly, as that of a "[w] himpering lost child" (Letter to [George] Houghton Gilman). And an entry in Gilman's diary on 31 December 1900, shortly after Katharine had reunited with her mother and new stepfather in New York, simply reads, "I am happy & content. Houghton—Katharine—Home," and suggests Gilman's pleasure at their proximity after such a long separation (*Abridged Diaries* 212).

Equally important, Gilman's personal writings also reveal how her own relationship with *her* mother, while it did not include extended physical separation, was psychologically distant, as several scholars have noted.[13] Mary Hill has observed that Gilman bonded with her mother over their reading of sentimental novels, texts that may have informed the sentimentalism with which Gilman sometimes treated motherhood later (60). Nevertheless, Gilman's autobiography recounts in painful detail how, as she and her brother moved beyond babyhood, her mother "increasingly lost touch with [her children], [as] wider and wider grew the gulf between" them, and she asserts her mother's denial of "all expression of affection as far as possible" (*Living* 10). Indeed, Mary Perkins limited herself to caressing and holding the young Charlotte only when she thought her to be asleep. As the adolescent Charlotte's writing talent began to emerge, Mary Perkins again showed her emotional distance from her daughter by dismissing the latter's poetry (*Living* 70), and later, when Gilman suffered separation from her dear friend Martha Luther, she writes that she received no comfort elsewhere, for "[m]y mother

and her half-sister, with whom I lived, were unutterably remote—alien—and out of hearing" (*Living* 80).

In light of these contexts, the choice of Gilman's heroine in *Mag—Marjorie* to separate herself from her daughter is a vexed one on several levels. Most simply, the heroine of Gilman's fourth novel has herself already suffered mother-loss, as an impoverished orphan who was quite literally farmed out to an unsympathetic and grudging aunt at the age of three (an arrangement that recalls less the author's widespread praises for surrogate or shared parenting and more Gilman's own humiliating dependence on the largesse of relatives during her impecunious, migratory childhood). The narrator in the opening pages of the novel laments how Margaret Wentworth has received dysfunctionally little affection, though she has "inherited an appetite for petting, a fierce longing to be held close—close—and called tender names" (17). However, after her "fall" from sexual purity, Margaret quickly forms a loving surrogate-daughter relationship with her mentor Mary Yale. Margaret calls the older woman "Mother," and Gilman writes of Miss Yale that "[f]ew mothers personally enjoy the society of their daughters as much as this world-mother enjoyed her favorite child's companionship" (71). Instances of women serving as surrogate mothers to other women or girls pervade Gilman's fiction, from social problem-themed stories including "Turned" (1911) and "An Innocent Girl" (1912), the latter featuring recurrent mentor Mrs. MacAvelly, to the utopian scenario of *Herland*. The intertextuality of this aspect of *Mag—Marjorie* is thus considerable, as is the literary significance of the maternal as a metaphor throughout Gilman's writing. However, it is also possible to regard Gilman's treatment of this relationship in *Mag—Marjorie* through an autobiographical lens as a remaking of Gilman's mother into the kind of affectionate mentor she craved—and perhaps as a re-visioning of her own complicated relationship with her daughter. Indeed, Gilman uses identical diction in writing of her own life to describe a desire for physical motherly affection like her heroine's. In her autobiography she writes, "Looking back on my uncuddled childhood, it seems to me a sad mistake of my heroic mother to withhold from me the petting I so craved, the sufficing comfort of maternal caresses" (78). And in a letter from Gilman to Katharine written in 1933, she laments, "How children suffer from those who loved them most! I did try so carefully not to hurt you, and to love and pet you as I so longed to be loved and petted and never was" (qtd. in Lane 324).

However, in Gilman's novel it is the young woman's beloved mentor who asserts that she must be parted from her child in order to succeed in remaking her life. Miss Yale argues, "[your daughter] must not know you are

her mother until you are ready to claim her" (55), implying that Margaret must "earn" the right to be a parent. Interestingly, this argument in some ways resembles the Social Hygiene rhetoric Gilman often incorporated in her writings, most notably her 1911 novel *The Crux,* wherein she championed female agency in mate selection so that women could choose as mates sexually continent men who had thus "earned" the right to become fathers. Indeed, Margaret provides a cautionary example for Social Hygiene in the early portion of *Mag—Marjorie;* as she chooses the dissolute Dr. Armstrong as a sexual partner (though admittedly ignorant of such matters, which is another Gilman critique of the sexual double standard), she has not practiced this essential duty and has yet to redeem herself before she is "fit" to be a mother to her child.

As much as Margaret sees the merit of Miss Yale's arguments about what Gilman elsewhere claimed was the first duty of a mother—"to be a mother worth having" ("Our Place Today")—her experience of parting from her daughter is no less agonizing. Gilman writes that, despite Margaret's heartache,

> She learned, out of her own keen intelligence, what no books could have taught her, how to hold down her grief, and use it as a spur. She rigidly closed her mind to thoughts of her child during the hours of work, and the hours of play. She allowed, however, one period of tender retrospect, before sleeping, letting her mind dwell on that small rosy sweetness her arms so hungered to hold; and then she checked her tears and restocked her armory of patience by the thought that if she really loved her child and wished to serve her, she must simply work. (*Mag—Marjorie* 56)

This pivotal passage not only articulates a philosophy that guided Gilman herself throughout her own life, but also shows how that philosophy particularly bore upon the challenges faced by mothers who wished to prioritize their role as "world workers." More mundanely, Gilman's allowing her heroine to long for her baby at bedtime recalls aspects of Gilman's autobiography: for example, Gilman wrote of how she learned to restrain the active imagination that her mother so disparaged by restricting it to musings each night in bed after story reading (*Living* 20). Also, Margaret's allowing herself periods of "tender retrospect" about her child only in the moments before sleep recalls Mary Perkins's similar curtailing of the young Charlotte's moments of physical affection with her mother. More fundamentally, this passage suggests practices of denial and repression that Gilman herself engaged in to avoid painful thoughts about her daughter. As she wrote to Grace Chan-

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ning Stetson a little over a year after relinquishing Katharine to the latter's care, "I [*sic]* gladdens my heart to have the steady good news of Katharine. I find I grow more sensitive about her, rather than less. Sometimes it aches. But I try to hold the right attidude [*sic*] unflinchingly" (16 Sept. 1895; Gilman, *Selected Letters* 96). A year and a half later, in another letter to Grace lamenting the pain that the separation caused her, she writes,

> This won't do. I can't afford to ache. Dear, I think if you could see how patiently I try to carry my patched and cracked and leaky vessel of life—how I pray endlessly for strength to do my work!—only that—how I use what strength I have, when I have any, to hold the attitude and do the things which to me seem right, how I have truly and fully accepted the not-having—O well, there!—We all do what we can. (11 Jan. 1897; *Selected Letters* 100)

And as she wrote to Houghton on 1 October 1897, "to keep open and thrillingly responsive to *the thought of her* [Katharine] would be, to my temperament, death. Or a mind unhinged. I cannot bear any more leaks and losses and pains" (Gilman, *Journey* 104). Finally, Margaret's resolution at the close of this passage in *Mag—Marjorie* "that she must simply *work*" (emphasis mine) underscores the enduring appeal that the notion of redeeming labor held for the author. Indeed, it would not be an overestimation to say that finding and performing world-improving work, for Gilman, was the good that trumped all others, no matter the cost.

While these aspects of the novel thus make it a paradoxical reflection of both the optimistic theoretical visions of maternal separation Gilman publicly articulated elsewhere and the inward pain that Gilman's separation from her child caused her, other aspects of *Mag—Marjorie* instead assert contrast between Gilman's experiences as a parent and her fictive treatment of motherhood here. For example, the novel's depiction of the practice of co-mothering manifests sharp distinctions between fiction and the reality of Gilman's life. The novel's rosy picture of the kind co-mother to Dorothea, a young widow named Julie who lives in the Swiss Alps, is in line with Gilman's usually felicitous visions of surrogate parenting in her fiction, asserting that Margaret's "mind was easy about the child, though her heart ached steadily. She knew that 'Aunt Julie' was as good to little Dorothea as to her own boy, only a year older; that both children had the loving care of wise grandparents; that the place was ideal for happy and healthy childhood" (56). In a similar vein, a lecture that Gilman gave in 1914 titled "Wider Motherhood" provided an idealistic parable of a mother who, disliking small children, let her sister raise her offspring until they were ten years old, visiting them from time to

time, after which she took them back into her own home with no adverse consequences. However, in Gilman's own life, her co-mothering of Katharine with Grace Channing Stetson indeed bred tension and resentment on the part of the latter, who put her own writing aspirations on hold to fulfill that role. Stetson published a story in 1907 in *Harper's Monthly* (interestingly, under her maiden name) titled "The Children of the Barren," which presented critically a couple who chose to leave their two oldest children with a childless relative so that they could travel.[14]

Further evidence that Gilman's treatment of Margaret's separation from her daughter in *Mag—Marjorie* may be both a reflection of and a conscious divergence from her own complicated history of separation from Katharine lies in the novel's depiction of their reunion. As if in an attempt to reverse Gilman's own history, Margaret is finally reunited with Dolly when the latter is nine years old, the same age that Katharine was when Gilman's divorce from Walter was finalized and she sent her daughter to Walter and Grace (and the same age that Gilman herself was when her parents formally separated, in another resonance of emotional loss that this particular age held for her). However, the long-anticipated reunion between young Dolly and the woman she knows only as her "sister" is anticlimactic. Indeed, Margaret suffers the pangs of watching Dolly express more affection to Miss Yale than to herself, and she vows to "[lay] siege to the child's heart" (93). Moreover, Margaret's dedication to the "bittersweet campaign . . . [of] the wooing of her own child's heart" (113) again recalls Gilman's own confession to Houghton in an 1899 letter that she was "secretly wooing her child" (10 Nov. 1899; *Journey* 310). And as with Dolly's hesitance to warm up to her mysteriously affectionate "sister" in the novel, Gilman suffered Katharine's sometimes less-than-ready affections after several years of separation with only intermittent visits. When Katharine entered her middle adolescence, Gilman grew interested in having her daughter live with her again, but Katharine was ambivalent, preferring the opportunities that traveling in Europe with her father offered to living in New York with her mother (Lane 317–18). In Gilman's novel, Margaret even attempts to win over her daughter with "loving gifts" (89), the principal one of which is a wristwatch. Ironically, this object connotes the Progressive Era's coveted values of self-discipline, time management, and efficiency that allowed Margaret to become a successful doctor, at the price of that maternal separation. The desire to foster closeness with a child toward whom one feels guilt through giving gifts or money would resurface in Gilman's life as well; when she began sending checks to the adult Katharine and her impecunious husband, an accompanying 1921 letter laments, "There has been so much, so very much, that I failed in giving you, dear child," asserting that the enclosed

money is "not even a gift—it is a mother's due, long over due!" (28 April 1921; *Selected Letters* 141).

Such parallels between the events and themes of *Mag—Marjorie* and Gilman's own life notwithstanding, a major distinction between them is even more provocative. Namely, while it appears that Gilman's heroine in *Mag—Marjorie* does finally secure her daughter's love, if within the fabricated relationship of sisterhood, the end of the novel leaves unclear whether Margaret will acknowledge Dolly as her daughter. Gilman elects not to give us the expected scene of bittersweet reconciliation between revealed mother and child but instead chooses to end the novel with Margaret's romantic union with the sympathetic Dr. Newcome. The concluding scene, in which he proposes marriage to Margaret, focuses on Margaret's shame at her past "sin" and Newcome's gallant dismissal of it, offering her the option of continuing her artifice: "Now I, being honored above all men, marry a lovely young widow. We have Dolly with us, but we keep the status quo—for her sake, if you choose. If not—just as you decide" (147). This lack of resolution to the novel's greatest conflict is as striking as Gilman's utter silence about her own parenting experiences that one observes in *Concerning Children,* with the latter's rigorous adherence to an impersonal, quasi-scientific perspective. If, as Gilman claimed in her essay "The New Generation of Women" (1923), "women are first, last, and always mothers" (288), echoing her many assertions elsewhere of the importance of motherhood, why does Gilman conclude *Mag—Marjorie* by emphasizing Margaret's identity as romantic partner rather than as mother? It would seem that the heroine's struggle to succeed professionally at the cost of separating from her child would have presented a greater challenge than that of finding an appropriate suitor. Furthermore, Gilman's avoidance of what would likely be a sentimental scene is perplexing in light of her tendency to employ sentimentalism in her treatment of motherhood, as Monika Elbert has noted (106).

Perhaps an explanation for Gilman's surprising choice to privilege the romantic over the maternal in the novel's conclusion lies partly in her own relationship with Houghton, the romantic partner she finally found who supported her public aspirations wholeheartedly. During a vacation taken with Katharine in the summer of 1898, Gilman admitted in a letter to her then-suitor that she loved, yet also resented, the girl's presence, as it seemed to take away from Houghton's preeminence in her heart (Letter to Houghton Gilman, 21 June 1898; *Journey* 160). And indeed, her letter to him of 12 March 1899 states conclusively, "As far as personal happiness goes you are more to me than my child—far more" (*Journey* 249). On the other hand,

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having created so delusive a scenario between mother and daughter in this novel, one wonders whether Gilman, who often subordinated fictive or aesthetic development to ideological purpose, was simply unwilling to portray the difficult emotions Dolly would realistically feel upon learning the truth about her mother—or, equally importantly, the public censure Margaret might consequently receive as an "unnatural mother," as Gilman herself had experienced upon relinquishing Katharine. Despite the unabashed ideological intent behind so many of Gilman's optimistic and neatly resolved fictional conclusions—including those of her many tales championing innovative parenting and childcare arrangements—the curious close of this novel, in the lack of resolution of its most conflicted and personal issue, is the strongest testament of its connection to Gilman's own complicated experiences as a mother. Gilman not only theoretically reenvisioned how child-rearing could occur, but also in her own life exemplified alternative childcare arrangements that were controversial in their time. *Mag—Marjorie,* situated in a fictive middle ground that borrows both from Gilman's theoretical discussions on parenting and her own lived experiences, raises important questions about society's expectations about motherhood that nonetheless had no simple answers.

Finally, while this novel's scenario of extended maternal absenteeism is indeed a choice that many mothers of young children today would not enter into lightly, *Mag—Marjorie* more generally encourages us to consider how the censures that Gilman received for her then-radical visions of maternal separation, even in the short rather than long term, still persist. Workers today who can afford them have many childcare options available; indeed, countless women, including unmarried ones, can pursue such goals as a medical degree, as the heroine of Gilman's novel did, without having to send their children off to the care of others for months at a time. But in addition to the real challenges (high costs, lack of availability, higher frequency of communicable illness) that can arise to blunt Gilman's rosy visions of baby gardens, our culture still pressures many working mothers to question themselves inwardly and to defend themselves outwardly about even workday absence from their children (especially preschool-age children). Many women today face the same challenge that Mary A. Hill interprets as existing in Gilman's own life: "Taught from childhood to accept 'feminine' self-abnegation, to 'love' in dependent and self-denying ways, women find it hard to respect themselves, much less to recognize, accept, and respect authenticity and purpose in their work" (*Journey* 14). This challenge often becomes all the more fraught when the cost of that work is outsourcing the care of one's children.

Some consider the recent so-called "Mommy Wars" in America at the

turn of the twenty-first century a phenomenon fabricated by the media—the tension between mothers caring for children at home and those pursuing careers, as manifested in countless talk show segments, news articles, and books.[15] These "Wars" are often voiced in oppositional discourse that Gilman anticipated with precision one hundred years ago in the debate between "natural" and "unnatural" mothers that she traced in *Concerning Children.* Whether this phenomenon is simply a media myth (or reflection of the sociopolitical climate of the turn into the twentieth century) or not, many women in the midst of raising children today and making difficult decisions about when to remain at home or continue a career would admit that the issues this debate raises are all too real, and they indeed reiterate the cultural debate that Gilman engaged in at the turn of the previous century.

In utopian works such as *Moving the Mountain* (1911), *Herland* (1915), and *With Her in Ourland* (1916), Gilman masterfully employed the construct of a visitor or visitors from another context to put the social problems of her own milieu into a fresh perspective. If Gilman could have traveled to the future to visit United States society at the start of the twenty-first century, she would likely be glad to see that the pervasive, if often expensive, availability of childcare today would allow a modern-day Margaret Wentworth to pursue a professional dream without prolonged separation from her child (although, as one who advocated men's "equalizing up" to what she saw as the higher sexual standards of women at the turn of the century and who decried the growing female "sex expression" of the 1920s, Gilman might arguably be more uncomfortable with today's decreasing stigma over unmarried motherhood). On the other hand, Gilman would also likely criticize the lack of training, low pay, and lack of societal respect for many childcare providers today, as she envisioned these workers as "high-grade, well-paid expert attendants and instructors" able to provide "the most gentle and exquisite training . . . education more valuable than that received in college" (*Concerning Children* 127). But more significantly, as works like *Mag—Marjorie* suggest, in confronting (if not always resolving comfortably) the difficulties of how to balance work and motherhood, Gilman would likely be unpleasantly surprised to find women in the twenty-first century often facing the same challenges that she sought so earnestly to overcome.

NOTES

1. Gilman developed *Mag—Marjorie* from a brief play entitled "The Balsam Fir," which she had written earlier. I thank Cynthia J. Davis, Denise D. Knight, and Jennifer

S. Tuttle for generously sharing resources and providing feedback during the writing of this essay.

2. Akin to the predicament Gilman scholars face in how to refer to the author, who at various points in her life carried the surnames of Perkins, Stetson, and Gilman (I refer to her by her final surname, under which she published *Mag—Marjorie*), the protagonist of this novel is variously called "Mag," "Maggie," "Marguerite," "Margaret," and finally "Marjorie" throughout her evolution. To avoid confusion, I refer to her throughout this discussion as "Margaret," which she is called for most of the novel.

3. Benigna MacAvelly is the heroine of Gilman's 1914 novel *Benigna Machiavelli;* a "Benigna MacAvelly" or "Mrs. MacAvelly" also appears as a mentor to the female protagonists in five of Gilman's *Forerunner* stories, "According to Solomon" (*Forerunner* 1.2 [Dec. 1909]: 1–5), "Martha's Mother" (*Forerunner* 1.6 [Apr. 1910]: 1–6), "Mrs. Potter and the Clay Club" (*Forerunner* 2.2 [Feb. 1911]: 31–36), "An Innocent Girl" (1912), and "Maidstone Comfort" (1912).

4. Gilman thus presents a scenario analogous to the subterfuge Charlotte Lovell must employ for her "niece" Tina in Edith Wharton's novella "The Old Maid (The 'Fifties)" (1922, 1924) in Wharton, *Novellas and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1990): 371–444.

5. For example, in her February 1913 *Forerunner* essay "On Ellen Key and the Woman Movement," Gilman asserts, "Now I am not primarily 'a feminist,' but a humanist. My interest in the position of woman, in the child, in the home is altogether with a view to their influence upon human life, happiness, and progress" (235).

6. For more on Gilman's praises for and differences of opinion with Ellen Key on motherhood, see "On Ellen Key and the Woman Movement" as well as Gilman's October 1913 *Forerunner* essay, "Education for Motherhood" (See *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: A Nonfiction Reader,* edited by Larry Ceplair (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 239–47).

7. Perhaps in a testament to the story's significance for Gilman, "An Unnatural Mother," reprinted in the June 1913 *Forerunner,* was expanded as "The Unnatural Mother" in the November 1916 *Forerunner.*

8. See McCartney 2 and "Early Child Care and Self-Control, Compliance, and Problem Behavior at Twenty-Four and Thirty-Six Months" (The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, *Child Development* 69.4 [Aug. 1998]: 1145–70) for current findings on the effects of high quality childcare.

9. See McCartney 3 for further discussion of these detrimental aspects of daycare.

10. The unpublished autobiography and letters to Degler are in Walter Stetson Chamberlin's private collection in Los Alamos, NM. I am indebted to Cynthia J. Davis for sharing this information with me.

11. See Hill 232–37 and Lane 310–12 for discussions of the authors' interviews with Katharine Stetson Chamberlin.

12. Gilman, *Selected Letters* 97. Other letters are hereafter cited parenthetically from this edition, with the exception of those cited parenthetically from *A Journey from Within: The Love Letters of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1897–1900,* ed. Mary A. Hill.

13. For example, see Lane 38–39 and Ammons 42–43 for discussions of Gilman's relationship with her own mother.

14. I thank Cynthia J. Davis for alerting me to this story.

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15. This debate and the term "Mommy Wars" goes back as far as the late 1990s; for example, see Tracy Thompson's "A War Inside Your Head" in *The Washington Post Magazine* (15 Feb. 1998): W12. Other notable articles on the issue include Lisa Belkin's "The Opt-Out Revolution" in *The New York Times Magazine* (26 Oct. 2003, Section 6): 42, 44–46, 85–86, and Louise Story's "Many Women at Elite Colleges Set Career Path to Motherhood" in the *New York Times* (20 Sept. 2005): A1, A18. The debate has produced several books, including Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels's *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined All Women* (New York: Free Press, 2005); Caitlin Flanagan's *To Hell With All That: Loving and Loathing Our Inner Housewife* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006); Miriam Peskowitz's *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005); Leslie Morgan Steiner's *The Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families* (New York: Random House, 2006); and Judith Warner's *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

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