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Gardens, Houses, and Nurturant Power in The Secret Garden

Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911) has elicited a considerable body of appreciative explication; the book has been praised for psychological realism in its portrayal of ill-tempered children, for example, and for its use of pastoral imagery to symbolize the children's physical and psychological healing. Recently, however, the book has undergone a feminist critique by Elizabeth Lennox Keyser. Keyser laments that after Mary Lennox's healing process is well under way, the book shifts its focus to the recuperation of her cousin Colin Craven, while Mary herself "slips into the background until she disappears entirely from the final chapter" (9). Keyser asserts that the book's imaginative power diminishes with this shift in focal character. The now conventional Mary and the "self-centered" Colin never engage the reader as did the earlier "contrary," "independent, self-contained" Mary (2, 7, 9). According to Keyser, *The Secret Garden* reflects Burnett's own "ambivalence about sex roles" (10); like women writers such as the Brontës, George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott, and Mrs. Humphry Ward, Burnett was uncomfortable with the self-assertion of her writing career and chastened herself by chastening "her self-assertive female characters" (10). Even more, by ending her book with a description of "the master of Misselthwaite with his son, Master Colin," Burnett "seems to be affirming male supremacy" and suggesting "a defense of patriarchal authority" (12).

Keyser has described a response to characterization in *The Secret Garden* which, I have discovered, other readers share; and the gender-role conflicts Keyser identifies as the source of Burnett's portrayal of Mary and Colin are easily documented by looking at Burnett's other fiction as well as her life, as I have argued in my book. However, if

one is to explain why *The Secret Garden* continues to fascinate readers and elicit critical explication, if one is to describe the deeply female voice many readers hear in the text, one must move beyond "Images of Women" criticism, as Toril Moi has observed (42–49). One must look not only at the book's portrayal of individual characters but also at its configurations of characters and webs of symbolic imagery. My essay attempts this task by discussing as focal centers of meaning not Mary and Colin but the secret garden—the book's title "character"—and Misselthwaite Manor. An examination of these images shows Burnett's masterpiece to be a celebration of nature's power as a primarily female power, a gender designation provided earlier by canonical Romantic poets, who "troped" nature as "female," as Anne Mellor has pointed out (8). To highlight the nearly utopian vision of female nurturant power to be found in *The Secret Garden*, comparisons will be made with Burnett's other fiction, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), and Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). Burnett loved and was clearly influenced by Charles Dickens, as I have earlier pointed out (22, 31, 126–27); and the parallels between *The Secret Garden* and *Jane Eyre* have been noted by others besides myself (100), for example Burnett's biographer Ann Thwaite (220).

In using the secret garden's transformation from seeming death to blossoming health as an image for the parallel transformation of the two children, Burnett was following well-established Romantic precedents. In *Emile* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau said the child should be given a garden to cultivate (bk. 2, p. 98), and he described the child itself as a young plant to be carefully tended (bk. 1, p. 58). Catherine Sinclair used garden imagery in the preface to *Holiday House* (1839), which anticipated many late-nineteenth century children's classics in its appreciation for high-spirited, "contrary" children. Sinclair lamented that current methods of education suppressed in the child "the vigour of natural feeling, the glow of natural genius, the ardour of natural enthusiasm" (iv); she hoped instead for a child-garden in which "some lively blossoms that spring spontaneously in the uncultivated soil, might still be cherished into strength and beauty" (iv). The association of child and garden stirred the imagination of many. Michael Cohen has noted a considerable number of paintings from the 1770s through the 1850s which portray children in a garden, often suggested by part of a wall; poor children were sometimes portrayed as

being outside a garden, perhaps deprived of the Edenic innocence that should have been their birthright (94–112).

A garden can provide an image of not only childhood but also motherhood; as Sinclair's metaphor implies, a garden reveals as much about its gardener as about the composition of its soil and the kinds of plants that can grow there. According to the nineteenth-century ideology of separate gender spheres, mothers are the primary caretakers of the young child; the home is a primarily female sphere, isolated and protected from the competitive male world outside. In his earlier articulation of this ideology, the epistolary novel *Julie; or, The New Eloise* (1761), Rousseau suggested the holiness of a woman's calling and the isolation of her home by comparing it to both a convent and a walled garden. Through an extended description of the secluded garden "Elysium," which Julie tends on her husband's estate (pt. 4, letter 11, pp. 304–15), Rousseau suggests not only that a married woman chooses a domestic garden over the courtly love garden of illicit passion, but also that she creates this "Elysium" especially for the sake of her young children. The birds in Julie's garden demonstrate a "zeal for domestic duties, paternal and maternal tenderness" (309) as do the birds in *The Secret Garden*, published over a century later. That gardens provided images for motherhood as well as for childhood during the nineteenth century is suggested by Michael Waters's recent survey of the garden in Victorian literature. According to Waters, "it is virtually impossible to say anything about the garden in Victorian fiction without reference to the concept of home and the place of women within it" (227)

The use of a garden as an image for both childhood and motherhood figures prominently in the mid-century adult classic *Great Expectations*. Near the Gargery home, where Pip is reared as a young child, there is a garden in which he later has several crucial conversations with Biddy, his childhood friend and the bride nature probably intended for him, had not his aspirations and passions been diverted elsewhere by his visits to Miss Havisham's Satis House and his residence in London; Pip appreciates this childhood garden only after it is too late to return to it. In contrast is the garden on the Satis House grounds, where Pip often converses with Estella, Miss Havisham's adopted daughter. Frequently described as "neglected" and "rank," this walled garden provides an image of Estella's childhood much as Burnett's garden mirrors the childhood of Mary and Colin. Being fashioned as a tool for Miss Havisham's revenge on the world, Estella has been deprived of "the lively blossoms" of "natural feeling," to use Sinclair's words. Dickens underscores the importance of this garden by setting his concluding scene there; after their various misadventures in London, Estella and Pip meet on the Satis House grounds where nothing is left "but the wall of the old garden" (491; ch. 59). In this abandoned garden, however, lies any hope Estella may have for a better future. Just as Pip has recently relived and reaffirmed his childhood by allowing Joe to nurse him back to health after a serious illness has reduced him to virtual infancy, Estella must find and nuture the dwarfed plants of natural feeling surviving from her childhood if she and Pip are to go forth in a mature, adult relationship.

If the Satis House garden provides an image of Estella's childhood, it similarly speaks of Miss Havisham's motherhood. Having grown up without a mother as well as having been rejected by her lover, she neglects to foster Estella's natural feelings even as she neglects the garden she herself never enters. The garden's walls shade the daylight from her garden as she has shut it out of her rooms. Pip finds snow in the garden after it has melted outside (108–9; ch. 11), snow that is as cold as Estella has become under the tutelage of her white-haired, bridal-garbed mother. Shortly before she dies, however, the snow in Miss Havisham's heart does melt; she shows that her own feelings are not dead. Still capable of suffering as Pip does from Estella's coldness and recognizing in Pip's suffering a mirror of her own, Miss Havisham asks his forgiveness and offers to make financial restitution. Perhaps it is because Miss Havisham eventually repents and attempts to compensate for her earlier abuse of a mother's role that she is allowed to leave at least the remnant of a garden to her adopted daughter. This garden's survival and Miss Havisham's late repentence offer a remnant of hope in a book filled with mothers who fail their high calling. Pip's biological mother fails him by dying, and the sister who takes his mother's place tyrannizes him with her switch, "Tickler"; before giving her up for adoption, Estella's natural mother threatens to kill her in revenge against Estella's father; Mrs. Pocket would allow her babes to swallow pins and tumble into the fire had she not the help of her older children and a nurse.

It is likely, as Keyser observes (11), that Burnett also felt she had sometimes failed her children. She often left them with their father while she pursued her career; and, watching her older son die, she felt keenly a mother's powerlessness. However, when she wrote *The Secret Garden* in late middle life (she was in her early sixties, two decades had passed since Lionel's death, and Vivian was an adult), she allowed her-

self to rewrite this page in her history, and she left future child readers a healing legacy in her portrayal of the garden as an image of powerful motherhood.

Like the children in *Great Expectations*, Mary and Colin begin without mothers. Mary's mother neglects her for social gaieties and then, along with Mary's father, dies in a cholera epidemic, all in the book's first chapter; Colin's mother died when he was born. In *The Secret Garden*, as in *Great Expectations*, fathers are unable to compensate for the children's lack of adequate mothering. Archibald Craven is incapacitated by his excessive grief and avoids both Colin and Mary. Joe Gargery has insufficient psychological strength to intercede between his wife's switch "Tickler" and Pip. Until shortly before his death, Magwitch does not know that his daughter Estella has survived, and his efforts to make a gentleman out of Pip warp Pip just as Miss Havisham's rearing distorts Estella. Unlike Dickens, however, Burnett provided her children with a community of mothers, who work effectively with nature in the secret garden.

When Mary arrives at Misselthwaite Manor, she learns about the garden from the first caregiver to offer her psychological as well as physical nurture, the servant Martha. In the first part of the book, Mary is still a child who needs mothering, especially because she is too "independent" and "self-contained" (Keyser 9); psychologically unconnected to others, she is also detached from her own feelings. Mary then learns more about the garden—and herself—from the gardener Ben Weatherstaff and from the robin, which eventually points her to the garden's buried key and hidden door. Once Mary is inside the garden, Martha's brother Dickon helps her prune and plant with tools and seeds she had arranged to have him buy for her. Finally, Mary and later Colin are assisted by the mother of Martha and Dickon. Mother Sowerby—that "comfortable wonderful mother creature" who has birthed and reared twelve children of her own (250; ch. 24)—sends Mary a jump rope, and she later sends both Mary and Colin nourishing food to provide energy for their garden work. Working largely behind the scenes on their behalf, this archetypal earth mother eventually appears in the garden to praise what the children have done.

In *The Secret Garden*, effective motherhood means giving children tools to help themselves rather than making them tools for satisfying one's own egoistic desires, as Miss Havisham and Magwitch did—or as Burnett herself was accused of doing when she publicly described her younger son as the model for Little Lord Fauntleroy. Effective motherhood is not limited by gender—the gardener Ben Weatherstaff, Dickon, and the male robin, who helps his mate with their eggs in the garden, as well as Martha and Mother Sowerby, can nurture. Finally, effective motherhood, like gardening, is a shared, communal venture.

Once this nurturant "Magic" power has set Mary on the path toward health, Mary herself joins this mothering community. By bringing Colin and the garden together and then stepping back to let the garden and Colin do their work, she gives the kind of mothering she has received. This kind of mothering may not be "contrary" nor "self-assertive," but it need not be seen as totally self-sacrificial; it has its own rewards, the joy of working cooperatively with nature and other human beings, the sense of individual empowerment that can come when one participates in a nurturant power greater than any of its agents. The last part of *The Secret Garden* may be disappointing if one attends primarily to the characterization of Mary and Colin, and if one values primarily expressions of anger and dramatizations of self-assertion in texts written by women. However, if one regards the book's "heroes" to be neither Mary nor Colin but rather its community of mothers centered in the secret garden, and if one values also the ideals of empathy and connection which Carol Gilligan identifies as women's "different" moral "voice," the last part of *The Secret Garden* need not be considered disappointing.

Indeed, all of *The Secret Garden* can be deeply satisfying if one notices Burnett's portrayal of how the nurturant power of the garden gradually comes inside and transforms Misselthwaite Manor. A first glance at Misselthwaite Manor as a center of meaning does seem to suggest that Burnett's book is, at the least, avoiding criticism of "patriarchal authority" as well as the class system. The estate upon which both secret garden and manor rest is owned by Archibald Craven and will be inherited, presumably, by his male heir Colin. Working-class males like gardener Ben Weatherstaff and Dickon may join the mothering community in the garden but, like Martha, Mother Sowerby, and probably Mary, they do not own it. Women and working-class males may have nurturant power, but they have limited economic power. (The 1987 television-movie version suggests that Mary, if not Dickon, may eventually inherit the Misselthwaite estate along with Colin; portraying them as having no family relationship, it suggests that they will marry, in a scene reminiscent of the end of *Great Expectations*. After World

War I has killed Dickon and injured Colin, the young adults meet in the garden to exchange a promise to marry.)

It would be difficult to find in *The Secret Garden* a critique of the class system. Ben Weatherstaff has an acerbic temperament but he readily adopts the obeisant role of Colin's servant. Unlike Ben, Mother Sowerby calls Colin "dear lad" rather than "mester Colin" (275; ch. 26); also, the text does refer to her difficulties paying the cottage rent and giving her children enough food (50–54; ch. 4). But neither Mother Sowerby nor her children seem to suffer much—she finds that "th' air of th' moor fattens" her children, and "they eat th' grass same as th' wild ponies do" (50; ch. 4). Indeed, it was only in Burnett's realist adult fiction of the 1870s that she seriously addressed the economic inequities of class. By the time she wrote *The Secret Garden*, she had turned to popular adult romances such as *A Lady of Quality* (1896), *The Making of a Marchioness* (1901), and *The Shuttle* (1907), which purveyed a nostalgic, sentimental vision of Britain's landed aristocracy and its relationship to the virtuous, appreciative poor.

Throughout her career, however, Burnett's fiction did imply a critique of patriarchal restraints on women, often through the portrayal of houses and house ownership. In *The Shuttle*, for example, Burnett asserted emphatically that women should be allowed to maintain control of their own fortunes. When two American heiresses marry British aristocrats, one is tyrannized by her husband until her sister rescues her; and the romance emphasizes how the sisters' wealth restores the decaying British halls and estates. Burnett's own early childhood had provided her an example of houses as images of typical discrepancies in male and female economic power. She was born into a family made materially comfortable by her father's business, which sold household furnishings in Manchester, England. However, her father died when she was four, and her mother was unable to keep the business profitable in Manchester's mercurial economy. In her childhood memoir, *The One I Knew the Best of All* (1893), Burnett dramatized the resultant change in family fortune by comparing the smoggy, inner-city home they moved into after her father died with the suburban estate owned by relatives she sometimes visited (251–53; ch. 14; 29–31, ch. 3). Not surprisingly, when her writing brought her wealth, Burnett spent much of it on houses and estates; beginning in 1898, for example, she rented Maytham Hall in Kent; in 1909, she built a mansion at Plandome, Long Island, and later she bought another home in Bermuda.

Before she herself enjoyed the power of home ownership, however, Burnett offered a poignant portrayal of houses as images of male power and female dependence in *Through One Administration* (1883), based in part on her own unhappy married life with Swann Burnett in Washington, D. C. Bertha Amory's husband uses her social graces and fortune in his lobbying and money-making schemes; when these schemes are exposed, he goes abroad, leaving her to face the resulting financial ruin and social disapprobation. Her own economic resources depleted by one male authority, she becomes dependent on another. She moves with her children back to the home of her father, and the book's final lines depict her unhappy retreat to this home. Bertha climbs the stairs to the nursery—"the only safe thing . . . for a woman who is unhappy," she had earlier said (465; ch. 34)—and then shuts the door. The book ends with this image of a patriarchal house as imprisoning retreat.

In *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (1886) and *A Little Princess* (1905) as well as in *The Secret Garden*—the three romances which carry Burnett's reputation as a classic children's author—large houses remain images of economic, primarily patriarchal, power. However, these romances also suggest that if houses are not filled with nurturant power, they are essentially empty; they are not really homes. In *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, little Cedric's patrimony is epitomized by his British grandfather's estate and hall. As in *The Secret Garden*, women have limited economic power. Having relatively little money of her own, Mrs. Errol agrees to give her son to his grandfather; initially placed in a lodge on the grandfather's estate, she must rely on her son as an entrée to the patriarchal hall. Mrs. Errol does have considerable nurturant power, however; it is in no small part because of the kind of rearing she gave Cedric that he is able to soften his grandfather's heart. *A Little Princess* (1905; an enlargement of "Sara Crewe," a tale published in 1887–88, and a play produced in 1901–2) similarly portrays male characters as having the "magic" economic power to create a good life for a child. Sara's mother is dead and it is her father's money that causes her to be treated as a "princess" at Miss Minchin's school until he dies, apparently penniless; it is her father's wealthy business partner, Mr. Carrisford, who frees Sara from servant life in the school, restores to Sara her father's great wealth, and becomes her guardian.

By comparison to Sara's biological and adopted fathers, Miss Minchin has a relative lack of economic power and social station; if she and her sister have an inheritance, they apparently need to supplement it by

running a boarding school for girls. Moreover, if Burnett's book suggests any motive for Miss Minchin's malignancy toward Sara, it is her jealousy of Sara's class and wealth. Their first trial of wills comes when Sara's fluency in French publicly embarrasses Miss Minchin, who lacks that index of class (19–25; ch. 2). Miss Minchin's preoccupation with money blinds her to Sara's princess-like nature, and the scene in which Miss Minchin tries to retrieve Sara from Mr. Carrisford's house contains a hint of the schoolmistress's economic vulnerability. When she threatens not to allow her pupils to visit Sara, Mr. Carrisford's lawyer reminds her that the pupils' parents are unlikely to refuse such visits. Miss Minchin immediately recognizes the veiled threat this reminder represents to the economic well-being of her establishment. She knows that "if Mr. Carrisford chose to tell certain of her patrons how unhappy Sara Crewe had been made, many unpleasant things might happen." Burnett's narrator calls Miss Minchin a "woman of sordid mind" for believing "that most people would not refuse to allow their children to remain friends with a little heiress of diamond mines" (215; ch. 18). If Burnett had wanted to make Miss Minchin a sympathetic character, her narrator could have added that Miss Minchin was probably right that "most people" would probably share her overvaluation of Sara's wealth and thus might similarly be described as being "of sordid mind."

Clearly, however, Burnett did not intend Miss Minchin to be a sympathetic character. In this variant of the Cinderella tale, Miss Minchin is cast in the role of the wicked stepmother; thus, it is her lack of nurturant rather than economic power that Burnett stresses. (In her fiction, Burnett chastised female characters far more harshly for a lack of nurturance than for self-assertion. *A Lady of Quality* scandalized critics because its heroine goes unpunished for having in a fit of rage killed her former lover, while in her last romance, *Robin* [1922], Burnett mercilessly embroiders the sins of a neglectful mother before having her obliterated in a World War I bombing raid [312].) In *A Little Princess*, Burnett portrayed a female establishment diametrically opposed to the mothering community found in *The Secret Garden*. Sara herself knows how to mother, as Mary learns to do; but Sara, unlike Mary, does not find adult women who effectively mother her—Miss Amelia is too much dominated by her sister to act on her softer feelings and sense of justice. While Mother Sowerby offers Mary and Colin nourishing food and praise for good work, Miss Minchin withholds both food and appreciation from overworked Sara. Finally, Miss Minchin's lack of nurturant power is imaged by her school, a large urban house devoid of gardens or other signs of nature's creatures other than the rats Sara tries to domesticate. For a reviving glimpse of nature, Sara must peer at the birds and sky outside her attic room. And, since Miss Minchin proves unable to become a nurturant mother, her house itself is unredeemable and Sara must leave it in the end. In *A Little Princess*, it is male adults who nurture—Sara's father and his friend Mr. Carrisford; Mr. Carrisford's servant Ram Dass, who enters Sara's attic room to transform it; and Mr. Carrisford's lawyer, a doting father of many children, who travels to the continent to find her. In Burnett's utopia, as suggested by her romances for children and adults, neither nurturant nor economic power would be the province of one gender; men would nurture and women would own houses.

Women do not own houses in *The Secret Garden*; inasmuch as they can nurture, however, they fill houses with a power without which the signature on a deed of ownership brings little happiness, as is dramatized by the life of Archibald and Colin Craven at the beginning of the story. By its end, *The Secret Garden* does fall far short of the utopian vision in its portrayal of economic distribution according to gender and class; however, if one examines Misselthwaite Manor as well as the secret garden as a center of meaning, Burnett's masterpiece is nearly utopian in its portrayal of the power of nurturance. For Burnett portrays this male-owned manor, with its almost one hundred, mostly empty rooms, as being gradually entered and revived by the same nurturant forces that transform the garden.

In dramatizing this transformation of Misselthwaite Manor, Burnett used gothic elements like those found in *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*. (The gothic elements in *The Secret Garden* were heightened in the 1987 television movie.) Miss Havisham's Satis House, Edward Rochester's Thornfield Hall, and Archibald Craven's Misselthwaite Manor are all patrimonial mansions with large unused portions and ghostly hidden residents. Pip witnesses Miss Havisham's nocturnal wanderings; twice, he has a vision of her hanging from the rafters, foreshadowing her death from injuries incurred during a fire (94, ch. 8; 325, ch. 38; 413, ch. 49). Jane Eyre has several nocturnal encounters with Edward's wife Bertha before that woman's fiery death. During the night, Mary Lennox first follows a cry in the corridor to find Colin, and, at first, each child considers the other a ghost (124; ch. 13). In all three books, the hidden inhabitants represent some past victimization

which prevents present and future happiness. Victimized by a father who spoiled her and by a brother and lover who swindled her, Miss Havisham victimizes Estella and Pip. Having inherited madness with her wealth and, like Edward himself, having been married to solidify a family fortune, Bertha impedes the hopes Edward and Jane have for a happy marriage. Rejected by his father because he resembles his dead mother and because he has apparently inherited his father's crooked back, Colin proves destructive of himself and others; believing he will soon die, Colin refuses to go outside, and his tyrannical tantrums make the rest of the household as unhappy as he is.

Gothic manor and ghostly resident have different fates in the three books, however. In the adult novels, manor and resident prove unredeemable and are destroyed. Satis House is dismantled and sold as old building lumber, apparently at Estella's order (482; ch. 58); perhaps, since the house was never a home, its value to her is primarily monetary, unlike the grounds themselves with their remnant of a garden. This alone Estella struggles to maintain during her unhappy years of marriage to the abusive Drummle, when she relinquishes "little by little" all other possessions she has received from Miss Havisham (492; ch. 59). At the end of the novel, the grounds will again be built upon, though apparently not by Estella, for she declares that she has come to take "leave of this spot"; and the book's final paragraph describes Pip and Estella going out of that "ruined place" (493; ch. 59). Dickens remains as silent about what is to be built on the Satis House grounds as he is about the future home of Pip and Estella. At the end of *Jane Eyre*, Thornfield Hall, like Satis House, is a "ruined place," destroyed by Bertha's fire. Its proud battlements and chimneys have crashed in, just as its proud owner is now "stone-blind" and without one of his hands (377; ch. 36). Unlike Dickens, however, Brontë offers her characters an alternative; she describes the house where a humbled man and a now economically independent woman can be happy. The "manor-house of Ferndean," unlike Thornfield Hall, is of "moderate size, and no architectural pretensions"; moreover, it is "deep buried in a wood" (378; ch. 37). Earlier, an orchard-garden had allowed the love of Jane and Edward to blossom relatively free from those reminders of their economic inequity and of Edward's past that they found inside Thornfield Hall. In a more modest house totally enveloped by nature's green, however, past inequities and injuries can be healed in a fruitful marriage; Edward recovers at least enough sight to recognize that the firstborn in

his arms has "inherited his own eyes, as they once were" (397; ch. 38).

At the end of *The Secret Garden*, Misselthwaite Manor does not have to be abandoned or replaced because it is in the process of being transformed by the same nurturant power at work in the garden. The natural forces that lead Mary to enter the secret garden also prompt her to explore the house and find its secret inhabitant. The wind that blows aside the ivy to reveal the secret garden's hidden door also first reveals to her Colin's cry. At first, she can hardly distinguish his cry from the wind, but the cry becomes clear when a draft comes from his door through the passages and blows her door open (50; ch. 5). Later, it is because the "wuthering" wind and rain keep her awake one night that she decides to follow the cry through the corridors and finds Colin (122; ch. 8). Rain also plays a role in filling the empty house with the children's noisy life; rainy days prompt Mary, and later Colin with her, to explore and use as runways the manor's many unused rooms and corridors. Also, before Colin himself enters the garden, its natural healing force comes inside to him through Mary's lyric descriptions; similarly, Dickon brings his assorted animals which dart in and out of an open window in Colin's room.

Burnett's text emphasizes the opening of the manor to nature's healing influences by portraying this change as occurring simultaneously with those occurring in the garden. Her narrative cuts back and forth between garden and house, highlighting the parallel developments in what is occurring in the two places. In chapters 5 and 6, for example, Mary first hears Colin's cry and makes her first exploration of the house; in the next two chapters, Mary discovers the garden's key and door. The next three chapters describe her entrance and early work in the garden, followed by three chapters set inside, depicting Mary's first visit with Archibald Craven and her discovery of Colin. The book continues this pattern until the last two chapters, when Mother Sowerby and finally Archibald Craven enter the garden. The book's concluding paragraphs conflate the two settings by placing the reader inside a house now fully open to the garden's nurturant influence, a house ready to receive a father and son who can now truly live in the house as well as own it. For the first time in the book, Ben Weatherstaff—whose "duties rarely took him away from the gardens" (297; ch. 27)—is inside the house. It is by looking out the window with Ben that the reader receives the book's final vision of Colin and his father walking from the garden, across the lawn, and into the house.

Burnett uses not only narrative structure but also linking imagery to suggest that the garden's nurturant power is also filling the house. When Mary first enters the garden, Burnett's chapter title calls the garden "The Strangest House"; inside, Mary finds this "house" to have "arches," "alcoves," and "stone seats." Mary is obviously fascinated by the garden's secrecy, but she also feels alone; "I am the first person who has spoken here for ten years," she muses (76–79; ch. 9). Soon after, in speaking to Martha, she associates the garden with the loneliness she has experienced elsewhere on the estate. "This is such a big lonely place," Mary says. "The house is lonely, and the park is lonely, and the gardens are lonely. So many places seem shut up" (82; ch. 9). Neither house nor garden, however, is entirely empty of life. Both contain nests. During Mary's first exploration of the house, she sees "nothing alive" until she finds in a hole in a sofa cushion "six baby mice" "cuddled up asleep" in "a comfortable nest" (57; ch. 6). The garden also contains a nest. During Mary's initial visits, the robin who showed her the garden's key and door is still courting; later, however, the robin and his mate build a nest and tend their eggs there. Both garden and house not only contain nests but are suggested to be nests. When Dickon first enters the garden, Burnett's chapter title calls it "The Nest of the Missel Thrush" (100; ch. 11); later, through a picture and note that he leaves for Mary, Dickon identifies the garden as "her nest" and suggests that she is "like a missel thrush" (121; ch. 13). Dickon's note reminds the reader that, because of its name, Misselthwaite Manor can also be considered a nest for Colin—if Mary's first exploration of the house leads her to the nest of mice, her second trip leads her to a similarly hidden Colin. That Misselthwaite Manor is Colin's nest is further suggested by a conversation between the nesting robins in the garden. Watching Colin's strange behavior, the mother bird fears for her eggs until the father bird recalls that he had behaved similarly when his parents made him learn to fly; he tells her that Colin is like a bird just out of its nest and "learning to fly—or rather to walk" (261–62; ch. 25). Appropriately, later in the same chapter, the children find an empty nest in the manor; "the mice had grown up and run away and the hole [in the sofa cushion] was empty" (266; ch. 25).

Several paragraphs later, Mary makes a discovery that begins to reveal one of the most important secrets in Burnett's masterpiece, a secret fully revealed in the next two, concluding chapters: The "Magic" power at work in both house and garden is Colin's dead mother. Mary notices

in Colin's room that the curtain over the portrait of his mother is now open; this curtain provides yet another link to the garden, since it has been earlier described as "rose-colored" (132; ch. 13), while the ivy covering the garden door has, in turn, frequently been called a "curtain." Colin had shown Mary the portrait the night Mary found him; he had told Mary that he kept the curtain closed because he hated his mother for dying, because she smiled too much when he was miserable, and because "she is mine and I don't want everyone to see her" (133; ch. 13). Now that Colin is healthy and happy, however, it does not make him "angry any more to see her laughing" (267; ch. 25). Apparently, his garden experience of a power larger than his own has made him more willing to share. Finally, perhaps Colin is no longer driven by anger at her death because he senses that she is still somehow alive in his room. He tells Mary how, two nights ago, the moonlight had come in the window and made him pull the curtain's cord; it "felt as if the Magic was filling the room," he says, and he associates this Magic with his mother by adding that she "must have been a sort of Magic person." Mary's reply suggests that Colin's mother is alive in his room also in that her own soul at last shines through his face. Viewing the mother's laughing portrait, Mary tells Colin, "You are so like her now . . . that sometimes I think perhaps you are her ghost made into a boy." "If I were her ghost—my father would be fond of me," Colin observes (267; ch. 25).

Colin's observation points toward the final reunion of son and father in the garden, where his mother's Magic, now acknowledged in the manor, had first begun its work. The garden and garden community members have for some time been her living hands. It was because her orders to tend the garden preceded Archibald Craven's orders to have it locked that Ben Weatherstaff continued to prune the garden after she died (229; ch. 22). Similarly, it was Colin's mother who told Mary and Dickon to bring Colin to the garden, according to Mother Sowerby (217; ch. 21). Now, in a chapter titled "It's Mother," Colin's mother is given not only hands but voice by Mother Sowerby, who finally visits the children in the garden. When Colin says he wishes Mother Sowerby were his mother, she embraces him and says, "Thy own mother's in this 'ere very garden, I do believe. She couldna' keep out of it." Adding, "thy father mun come back to thee—he mun" (279–80; ch. 26), Mother Sowerby sends a letter telling Archibald Craven to return to the garden, a letter he receives just as he wakes—one moonlit night—

from a dream in which his wife called him back to her "in the garden" (287; ch. 27).

The final chapter, "In the Garden," describes Archibald Craven's return as a reprise of the earlier, more fully dramatized experiences of Colin and Mary. Without his knowing it, the garden had been at work within the father while it had worked within the son; he began to feel its "awakening" power while gazing at a forget-me-not on the same day Colin first entered the garden and declared, "I am going to live forever" (285–86; ch. 27). As he makes the trip home, Craven acknowledges that, in his earlier anger that "the child was alive and the mother was dead," "he had not felt like a father at all" (289; ch. 27). Perhaps aware that he needs to learn how to nurture, he stops at Mother Sowerby's cottage; she is away helping a woman with a new baby, but he recognizes, apparently for the first time, that the Sowerby children are "a healthy likable lot," and he gives them "a golden sovereign" (291; ch. 27). Craven must learn also to receive, however, if he is to give of himself as well as of his money. Still an isolate as Mary was at the beginning of the book, he must retrace her steps. After a brief visit to the manor, feeling "on earth again," Craven takes "his way, as Mary had done, through the door in the shrubbery and among the laurels and the fountain beds" to the garden (293; ch. 27). There, like Mary before him, he himself can be nurtured and thus learn how to nurture.

Some of the deepest satisfactions Burnett's masterpiece affords can be explained if one perceives that the reunion that occurs when Craven reaches the garden is not just paternal but maternal. The book's configuration of characters and webs of imagery have already suggested that it is the soul of Colin's mother that has been transforming the garden and the house with nurturant power; now, language of birth suggests that garden, and perhaps also house, are her maternal body. As the "rose-colored" curtain has recently been opened to reveal her portrait in the house, the door to the garden is now "flung wide open, the sheet of ivy swinging back"; "the uncontrollable moment" has arrived; with "quick strong young breathing," "a boy burst[s] through it at full speed and, without seeing," dashes "almost into his [father's] arms" (294; ch. 27).

By perceiving house and garden as images of not only the transforming power of nature and a mothering community but also of a mother's nurturant body, one uncovers a secret plot within *The Secret Garden* that breaks through its patriarchal sociology. Keyser points to this plot

when she includes the following in her description of what she remembered of the book before rereading it to write her article: "I remembered Mary exploring the winding paths and gardens within gardens, and indoors the winding corridors with their many locked rooms" (2). At some level, the reader, along with Mary, Colin, and finally even Archibald Craven, reenacts the usually repressed desire to explore the secret mysteries of the mother's body as well as her soul. It may be this plot which above all identifies *The Secret Garden* as what the French feminists call *écriture féminine.* According to Toril Moi (114), Hélène Cixous describes "the mother as the source and origin of the voice to be heard in all female texts." In *The Secret Garden,* we hear this voice, this voice of the mother who "physically materializes what she's thinking," who "signifies it with her body."

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