

Nurture Versus Colonization: Two Views of Frances Hodgson Burnett

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The Secret Garden: Nature's Magic, by Phyllis Bixler. Twayne Masterwork Studies, no. 161. New York: Twayne, 1996.

A Little Princess: Gender and Empire, by Roderick McGillis. Twayne Masterwork Studies, no. 159. New York: Twayne, 1996.

Phyllis Bixler, in her Twayne Masterwork study, concludes her summary of the ongoing critical debate over Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* as follows: "It would be inaccurate to consider the appreciative and the more critical scholars . . . as belonging to two armed camps. Few if any of the first group would deny that *The Secret Garden* reflects attitudes about gender and class we would like to believe we have put behind us; . . . On the other hand, critics who set themselves the task of unearthing the various ideologies in Burnett's text discover it to be amazingly fertile in their hands. . . . Finally, it is likely that all the critics whose work I have described would name *The Secret Garden* as . . . certainly among the most important children's books written during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (20). Bixler's characterization of Burnett's critics as falling into two categories—the appreciative and the more critical—and her collapsing of these two categories into a common recognition of Burnett's achievement aptly distinguish and connect these two new books. Bixler does not hesitate to place herself among the more appreciative of Burnett's critics and in *Nature's Magic* continues to "acknowledge . . . dated attitudes" while emphasizing the "strengths that help explain the book's continuing appeal" (20). Roderick McGillis in his study of *A Little Princess* undertakes "the task of unearthing the various ideologies" in that text and finds it, like *The Secret Garden*, "to be amazingly fertile." He concludes his study, however, on an unequivocal note of appreciation. Quoting the former owner of his paperback edition, he proclaims, "This is an excellent book!" (104).

Twayne's Masterwork Studies series, which now includes more than

160 titles, is designed for college and university students. Each volume contains a chronology of the author's life and a section on the literary and historical context, including a discussion of the work's reception and criticism. But the centerpiece of each volume is a fresh reading of the work, one that supposedly eschews both theoretical jargon and a narrow polemical approach. The volumes on children's or young adult literature (about a dozen have been published and more are projected) are especially designed for teachers or prospective teachers, and thus they feature an additional final section on approaches to teaching the text under consideration. Ideally, according to its editors, volumes in the Masterwork series should engage their readers and provide them with more than the study guide they may have bargained for. Although it is tempting for the cynical to view these volumes as little more than glorified *Cliff's Notes* (and a few volumes in the series might confirm that suspicion), Bixler's and McGillis's contributions more than meet their editors' expectations, and in fact they transcend the limitations of their genre. As one long familiar with both Burnett novels (*The Secret Garden* from childhood), as one who has taught them repeatedly and even contributed to the debate outlined by Bixler, I found both studies provocative, even inspiring, in their different ways. To me, they are not merely good introductions to the novels—and to literary criticism—for those who may be wary of the critical enterprise; they are also good introductions for experienced critics who may be coming afresh to these works (as, according to his own account, McGillis did to *The Little Princess* in 1993 [37]) or to the field of children's literature. The range of reference in both volumes to classics and lesser-known works for children provides a kind of anatomy (for this reason *Nature's Magic* will be assigned reading in my next introductory graduate course). Even, perhaps especially, for those familiar with the two Burnett novels and their criticism, these volumes offer many pleasures, as I hope the following discussion will show.

Following the Twayne format for its masterwork series, Bixler and McGillis both place the novels in their literary and historical contexts, identify their importance, and discuss their reception and recent criticism. Bixler situates *The Secret Garden* at the end of the golden age of children's literature and suggests that the book is a kind of culmination. McGillis in turn connects *A Little Princess* with other late Victorian and early Edwardian fiction for children but places literary history in the service of his theory about the book: that *A Little Prin-*

cess "is a reworking of the Crusoe story in terms of female experience" (8). Bixler's opening chapters lead the reader to expect a recapitulation of the themes that she and others have identified over years of engagement with the text. Those familiar with Bixler's previous book and several articles on Burnett are prepared to reenter the same garden but also to discover a still richer profusion of growth. McGillis's introductory chapters indicate that he will focus on a single, unexplored aspect of the novel; his reading will offer the adventure of accompanying a critic as he attempts to break new ground.

In their chapters dealing with criticism of the novels, McGillis remarks on the failure of critics to examine *A Little Princess* "in the context of the fiction of Empire" (33), Bixler on the way critics have placed *The Secret Garden* in that context. In his chapter on the importance of the work, McGillis suggests that an awareness of the imperial or colonial theme will help us appreciate the value of multiculturalism. After quoting a passage from the novel in which Ram Dass pays homage to Sara, he writes, "The book has it both ways: Ram Dass and the other Indian servants are correct in their subservience to Sara, and Sara in her turn is correct in her resistance to the tyranny of Miss Minchin and her minions" (20–21). One might argue here for a qualitative difference between Miss Minchin's personal vendetta against Sara and Sara's passive acceptance of the homage that she has done nothing personally to exact. One might also argue with McGillis's assertion that "this passage has no irony" (20), for the passage seems to imply that it is a matter of luck and timing rather than merit whether one is insulted or salaamed. Still, McGillis's point—that works such as *A Little Princess* should be studied not only for their aesthetic value and power to move us (to provide, in the words of McGillis's paraphrase of Tolkien, "recovery, escape, and consolation" [25]) but also for their ideological blindness—is well taken.

Bixler, however, responds to critics such as McGillis in the penultimate chapter of her book, the last of her "reading" of the text. While acknowledging that such interpretations can be supported, Bixler reveals more subtlety in Burnett's portrayal of the Sowerby family and manor servants than critics of her ideology have allowed. Not only does Burnett present unsparingly, if unobtrusively, the deprivations and hardships of poverty, she allows her working-class characters to comment on and even offer critiques of their superiors. Bixler concludes this section by remarking mildly that adult readers, in their efforts to excavate a complicated text, are as likely to be selective as

child readers. Bixler's own reading of *The Secret Garden* is as generous and inclusive as seems humanly possible, and her penultimate chapter seems as much a matter of giving the critics with whom she disagrees their due as a matter of getting the last word. McGillis's reading, on the other hand, is determinedly selective, and that is *its* particular strength. Had he adhered to that approach even more consistently (had he been less constrained by the Twayne format?), his reading of the imperial theme might have been still more coherent and convincing.

Bixler and McGillis present the readings of their respective texts quite differently. Bixler follows what she identifies as the structure of the novel. According to Bixler, Burnett "uses eight chapters (1-8) to establish Mary's character and get her inside the secret garden and another eight (13-20) to introduce Colin and bring him to the garden. Moreover, each group of eight chapters is followed by a similarly parallel group of four (9-12 and 21-24) depicting Mary's and Colin's transformations within the garden. The book's final three chapters (25-27) can be seen as a coda that recapitulates this theme through an abbreviated depiction of Mr. Craven's transformation and at the same time pulls together various earlier patterns of imagery, especially those related to parental nurturance" (62). The first chapter of Bixler's reading, like the first chapters of Burnett's novel, focuses on Mary, especially her psychology and the way in which the manor servants function as therapists; her second chapter focuses on the garden, Mary's growing friendship with Dickon, and the latent sexual content of these chapters; her third focuses on Colin and the parallels between his experience and Mary's; her fourth and perhaps strongest chapter, on the theme of nurturance and the triangle formed by Mary, Dickon, and Colin. The passage I quoted above, like the chapter it introduces (on Burnett's chapters 21-27), performs the same pulling-together service that Bixler attributes to the conclusion of *The Secret Garden*.

The advantages of this organizational strategy are obvious: whether a college professor preparing to teach *The Secret Garden* for the first time, a college student seeking a better understanding of the book, or a middle-school teacher about to present it to her class, the reader is able to concentrate on a group of chapters, then build on what she has learned as she goes on to the next. As the reader proceeds with Bixler, a plaintive melodic line becomes embellished with rich chords of meaning. These chords are provided by Bixler and the critics on

whom she draws, critics such as Gillian Adams, Barbara Almond, Jerry Griswold, and Judith Plotz. Counterpoint, and an occasional dissonance, is provided by reference to "more critical scholars," such as Lissa Paul and Jerry Phillips. The end result is no less a beautifully orchestrated performance of *The Secret Garden* than the 1991 stage and 1993 film adaptations, on which Bixler also draws.

In contrast, each chapter of McGillis's reading of *A Little Princess* makes a separate foray into the territory of the text and in some instances skirts that territory. Most of the first chapter consists of an impromptu essay McGillis wrote in response to an assignment he gave his children's literature class. In this essay McGillis tries to account for the book's appeal to young readers and is disturbed to suspect that Sara's "imperial attitude" (40) gratifies their desire for dominance. As though to counter his repugnance at the possibility, he offers another: that the source of Sara's—and the reader's vicarious—empowerment is her storytelling. Reevaluating what he wrote several years ago, McGillis now finds the second alternative less than satisfactory. Sara's imaginative activity is powerless to effect change, and thus she is a passive rather than an active heroine. Finally, McGillis entertains a third possibility—that Sara's strength is her ability to nurture and create a female community that crosses class lines. The connection between this capacity of Sara's and her—and her creator's—imperial attitude is not yet clear, but the reader anticipates illumination through textual analysis.

The next three chapters, however, offer something of a diversion. The first of these places *A Little Princess* in the context of nineteenth-century thinking about childhood innocence. McGillis's point, that Sara both embodies that innocence and suggests that it can survive childhood, is provocative, but the chapter does not advance the imperial theme. The next returns to that theme as it manifests itself in covers and illustrations of various editions of *Sara Crewe* and *A Little Princess*. The third is actually titled "The Importance of Empire," but the subtitle indicates that the discussion will concentrate on stage versions and film adaptations. This latter chapter contains an odd apology: "I seem to have shifted my attention from the primacy of the visual to the importance of Empire for an understanding of Burnett's story. Actually, the two are difficult to disentangle" (59). The shift instead seems to be from the importance of Empire within the text to its visual representations outside it.

Still, these three chapters have much to offer. The second one con-

cludes by deploring the way modern illustrators have “muted the imperial theme” in the interests of political correctness. Its unabashed presence in the early covers and illustrations accurately reflects “the casualness with which Burnett uses the Empire, her complete lack of awareness that she appropriates another culture and people for her own purposes.” McGillis reiterates a point made earlier: “Readers today deserve to know this, not to be protected from this knowledge” (56). The next chapter takes the 1995 film adaptation of *A Little Princess* to task not for its efforts to be “sensitive to racial matters” (61) but for the way it “perpetuates an imperial attitude to” India as well as “Burnett’s unconscious championing of a white middle class” (62). I am left pondering the difference between book covers and film adaptations—why one should reflect Burnett’s assumptions and not the other. This is the strength of McGillis’s study: it makes me ponder.

The next five chapters, in which McGillis’s focus returns to the text, constitute the heart of his study. In each the theme of Empire appears to have been dropped only to reappear at the ends of three of them, each time with an interesting twist. In the first of these chapters McGillis picks up on the word *savage*, used by the narrator to describe Sara’s attack on her doll: “The message here is that good English girls can, through deprivation, neglect, unkindness, and poverty, sink to the level of a ‘savage’” (67). But McGillis seems both to approve and disapprove of this message. On one hand, he praises it as an expression of the novel’s realism: “Unlike so many Victorian stories that show adversity and illness as necessary moral agents of renovation, *A Little Princess* shows how one good, if spoiled, little girl might be in danger of reduction to the state of savagery” (67). On the other hand, McGillis, by placing the word *savage* in quotation marks, seems to be blaming the message—or perhaps only its medium—for equating Sara’s violent behavior with what its author believes to be the norm for non-European cultures. In other words the message is at once an expression of Burnett’s refusal to romanticize, and thus essentialize, her child heroine, and her willingness to demonize, and thus essentialize, cultures other than her own. Or to put it still another way, she acknowledges that Sara partakes of the same nature as “the savage,” yet her very use of that word communicates her sense of an ineradicable difference between them.

Two chapters later, having traced Sara’s psychological growth, McGillis concludes that it has led her to adopt a mission: “I use the word *mission* precisely because it conjures up an image of Empire—

the mission to the colonies, missionaries and their activities among the 'natives.' Sara's mission is to repatriate the activities of Empire, and in doing this she implicitly offers a criticism of imperial activity abroad" (75). Here McGillis attempts, or sees Burnett as attempting, to reconcile Sara's "imperial attitude" with her propensity to nurture. Sara's imperial attitude, which, however appealing to the child reader, was repugnant to McGillis, has been chastened by both confinement and exposure into a more acceptable domestic imperialism. Thus McGillis begins to deliver on the tacit commitment made to his readers in the first chapter of the reading section: to provide a link between Sara's—and Burnett's—imperialism and their creation of an egalitarian female community. And in doing so he begins to entertain the possibility that Burnett was more self-conscious and critical in her treatment of Empire than he has yet allowed.

The third of these chapters, however, forecloses on that possibility once again. In what is perhaps his most fascinating chapter, the one on Sara's relationship to nature as represented by the rat Melchisedec and Ram Dass's monkey, McGillis seems about to conclude on an approbatory note: "Burnett's position here, as elsewhere in the novel, appears to embrace a liberal humanist ethic that sees everyone as partaking of an essential humanity that transcends class, cultural, and racial differences" (81). But he then goes on: "As we might expect, however, Burnett is not consistent. Ram Dass, like the monkey, is not similar to Sara. Far from it. . . . Class and race separate the little girl and the Indian man" (81). He concludes that Burnett "cannot overcome her sense of his difference; she cannot present him other than stereotypically" (81). The final chapter of McGillis's reading section, on Burnett's narrative voice, clearly identifies that voice with imperial power and privilege: "To maintain an Empire, a ruling state must manage two things: to establish a right to authority and to perpetrate an overriding ideology or pattern of thinking that those within the influence of Empire accept as natural. We can see both these aspects of Empire in Burnett's handling of the narrative of *A Little Princess*" (93). Thus after having tantalized his reader with the suggestion that Burnett might be offering a protofeminist revisionary critique of imperialism, McGillis ends by withdrawing the suggestion, or rather by seeming to forget that the suggestion had been made.

In an early chapter, we recall, McGillis claims that "the book has it both ways" (20). McGillis in his reading of the book also seems to want to have it both ways. At the end of the informal response paper

with which he begins his reading, McGillis confesses that the book's appeal to its readers' desire for dominance is "unpalatable" to him, and he seeks "solace in another kind of empowerment to be found in these pages" (40). The image that epitomizes that kind of empowerment is "Sara visiting Anne in the bakeshop to offer charity to the downtrodden" (40). Not only does McGillis's response paper end with this image; no fewer than six of his thirteen chapters (chapters 1, 2, 4, 9, 10, and 11) do as well. Perhaps McGillis keeps returning to this image because it corresponds to his desire to read the text as subversive of imperialism, a desire that he has not been able otherwise to gratify. Perhaps he also wants to leave in his readers' mind a positive impression of a book about which he continues to feel ambivalent. But perhaps the image also recurs because of its ambiguity: is Sara colonizing Anne, and through her other "savage" little children, or is she nurturing her? As recent discussion of children as though they were colonial subjects would indicate, the line between nurture and colonization tends to blur; they seem to constitute a continuum rather than represent moral opposites.

As critics, Bixler and McGillis can be viewed as occupying points on this continuum: Bixler appears to tend the garden of the text, helping its beauties appear to best advantage; McGillis, at least in the present instance, takes us on a journey into the unfamiliar territory of the text, enabling us to identify, understand, and occasionally condemn the way its values differ from our own. It is worth noting that Bixler, although she has written repeatedly about *The Secret Garden*, seldom alludes to her previous work, and then unobtrusively. She seems to have no sense of proprietorship, even though she was the first to explore many of its themes. Seldom does she use the first person singular in *Nature's Magic*; instead, she prefers the first person plural or such constructions as "Burnett calls attention to," "careful reading shows," "as has been noted," "if one remembers . . . her description here reminds one." She writes as though she is collaborating both with other readers and with the author. McGillis, on the other hand, calls attention to himself as an interrogator, interpreter, and sometimes a renovator of the text. He, too, frequently uses the first person plural but as though addressing members of a conducted tour. I am tempted to compare McGillis to the imperious narrator of *A Little Princess*, as he reads it. Yet it occurs to me that, in foregrounding his interpretive efforts, he is almost the antithesis of that narrator. Rather than presenting himself as omniscient, with authority to

speak for all, McGillis admits his fallibility and reminds the reader that he speaks only for himself. In fact, Bixler's self-effacement, her quiet but authoritative tone, does more to persuade the reader that hers is the final word and that the mysterious essence of *The Secret Garden* can be no more exquisitely refined. To put it briefly, Bixler's reading is a distillation, McGillis's a drama. The one, for all its inclusiveness, creates a sense of closure; the other, by foreclosing on some of its rich possibilities, reopens the critical debate.