

FROM PRETENDING TO SUPPOSING:
REDEEMING THE MADWOMAN IN FRANCES
HODGSON BURNETT'S *A LITTLE PRINCESS*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates how the emergent genre of girls' literature in the Victorian period served to destabilize and challenge contemporary restrictive depictions of women. It revises the theory of Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which posits that in nineteenth-century literature, women could only function as diseased, insane prisoners or else as angelic rulers of the domestic sphere; this thesis employs examples from Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* to prove that even during the height of Victorian literature, books written for and about young girls were already troubling the dichotomy set up by the literature of their mothers and older sisters. Imagination as it is shown in Burnett's novel is a process that combines the chaotic irrationality of the "madwoman's" insanity and the logic and agency characteristic of the "angel in the home"—it provides a middle ground where aspects of the Victorian "good" and "wicked" femininities can be reconciled.

DEDICATION

Sharon, Kelsy, David St. John – I love you! Let's meet up at the library sometime.

I will bake you brownies and we can gossip instead of studying.

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I want to thank you for being so kind to me—so heavenly kind—and making everything like a fairy story ... Please just let me say these words. It seems as if I OUGHT to say them. THANK you—THANK you—THANK you!
(*A Little Princess* 215)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE FRAGMENTED QUEEN

In 1864, John Ruskin delivered the lecture “Of Queen’s Gardens” to the people of Manchester, declaring that women are “called to a true queenly power—not in their households merely, but overall within their sphere” (85), that their duty “is to assist in the ordering, in the comforting, and in the beautiful adornment of the state” (122). In his lecture, Ruskin looks forward to a future England where women will be raised and educated as queens whose “wisdom and virtue” redeems the “folly or fault” of men (88), and whose “power is for rule, not for battle” (101). In 1979, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar looked back on the Victorian age, comparing the woman of Ruskin’s day to a “Queen” as well, albeit now the “Wicked Queen” of fairytales like “Little Snow White” (Gilbert and Gubar 36), a “plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist” (38), a “demonic” figure (39) who surreptitiously devises murders while trapped in her own bedroom, obsessed with her reflection in the looking-glass, “driven inward” (37).

These two Queens, Ruskin’s Good Queen and Gilbert and Gubar’s Wicked Queen, epitomize the popularly understood polarized representations of women in literature of the Victorian era. Adams writes on Victorian literature that “the celebration of female purity also underwrote a host of stark and constricting dichotomies, which allowed little middle ground between angel and whore” (Adams 9). The word choice in his analysis calls to mind Freud’s Madonna-whore complex, which Hedgecock similarly identifies with the Victorian period, highlighting “conventional Madonna-whore dichotomies that rule Victorian attitudes toward women” (Hedgecock 174). However, I would offer that the representation of women in Victorian literature is far more nuanced

than these scholars suggest, as they are overlooking (in their exclusive focus on women as sexual, fully mature agents) a genre of female-centric literature which came into prominence in the Victorian moment: children's literature, and specifically literature for young girls.

Girls' literature of the Victorian period offers a space for renegotiation and reconciliation of the Good Queen/Wicked Queen archetypes in its young heroines. Little girl protagonists like Lewis Carroll's Alice or George MacDonald's Princess Irene are young enough that they have not yet experienced the education which Ruskin imagines will shape them into Good Queens, nor have they felt the alienating responsibilities of adult womanhood that Gilbert and Gubar theorize would transform characters like them into Wicked Queens. They fall into neither category but possess features reminiscent of both, and use them in a productive way. They offer an alternative to the supposed dichotomy of women's representation in Victorian literature, the Good and Wicked Queens, an alternative I shall call the Princess.

Princesses are commonplace in Victorian girls' fiction, and not only as metaphorical figures, with the fairy stories of authors like George MacDonald offering many such royals in fantastical or historical settings. However, the metaphorical princess, the princess as part of the continuum of moral and ethical Queenship evident in the characters of Victorian women's literature, is best exemplified in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess*. This 1905 novel, which follows the survival of a rich officer's orphaned daughter who goes from a privileged upbringing to exile as a servant in the attic of a girl's school, demonstrates the synthesis of Good and Wicked Queen in children's literature. The heroine, Sara Crewe, effortlessly combines the Good Queen's association

with order and beauty with the Wicked Queen's freedom from the boundaries of reason. By combining the two Queens into one Princess, Sara supplements both Queenly figures where they are lacking and becomes something more powerful than either. That is, both the Good Queen and the Wicked Queen of the adult woman's novel were once the heroine of the girl's novel, both natures contained within her as pure potential. Ascending to adulthood, the heroine's nature is fragmented; she becomes either a Good Queen or a Wicked Queen, two types which, separated from their polarized counterpart, are hence incomplete and flawed. The Princess, then, is a healed version of the fragmented Victorian heroine, her power whole and complete. In *A Little Princess*, Burnett explores the extent of the power available to metaphorical Princesses, like her Sara, who mend the rift between Good and Wicked Queens and reconcile their abilities.

In this piece, I will demonstrate how *A Little Princess* deconstructs the binary of the Good and Wicked Queens— or rather, more correctly, reconstructs the figure of the Princess by reconciling the broken halves of her persona, the two abstracted and polarized queens. First it will be helpful to define more specifically what the titles of Good and Wicked Queen entail.

Victorian England serves as the perfect stage for a clash between conflicting metaphors of womanhood and Queenship. A nation headed by the paradoxical figure of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, a good portion of this without the assistance of a male King, Britain was already re-negotiating what “queenly power” might look like. In Victoria's own words: “I am every day more convinced that we women, if we are to be good women, feminine and amiable and domestic, are not fitted to reign” (qtd. in Munich 267). The Queen's statement raises a dilemma. If “good women” are not “fitted to reign,”

then Victoria is either proclaiming herself a capable ruler but a bad woman, or else a good woman but an unfit ruler. As Margaret Homans notes, discussing the Queen's image in Victorian media: “on the one hand, being a Queen may grant improper power to a woman; on the other, a proper woman may be too weak to be a monarch even of a parliamentary democracy” (“To The Queen’s” 8). In the person of Queen Victoria, who carefully balanced the personae of mighty empress and docile, nurturing matron, the dichotomy between Ruskin's Victorian woman—the Good Queen—and Gilbert and Gubar's Victorian woman—the Wicked Queen— is evident. And if Victoria is the model of all Victorian women, an assumption voiced in texts like the popular ditty “Since the Queen did herself for a husband 'propose'/The ladies will all do the same, I suppose” (qtd in “To The Queen’s” 1), then the Good Queen/Wicked Queen dichotomy extends to all the nation's women, the “queens,” as Ruskin puts it, of their individual households, as well as to the literary characters these same women create in the pages of their fiction.

The Good Queen of Ruskin's model embodies a lofty, romantic ideal. Almost a divine figure, she is a foil to men as Ruskin understands them, people constantly falling into “failure,” “offence,” “inevitable error” (101). Envisioning the ideal toward which he advises parents to raise their daughters, Ruskin describes the Good Queen:

She must—as far as once can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error. So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side: wise, not with the narrowness of insolent and loveless pride, but with the passionate gentleness of an infinitely variable, because infinitely applicable, modesty of service—the true changefulness of woman. (103)

Ruskin's women are “infallible.” They are “infallibly faithful and wise counselors— incorruptibly just and pure examples— strong always to sanctify, even when they cannot save” (91). He identifies the Queen's power to “sanctify” and “save” men with her ability to create and cultivate a home. In the domestic sphere, the Queen creates a stronghold against the “peril” and “trial” of the world to which men, who operate chiefly in the public sphere, are unfortunately vulnerable (101); the Queen becomes the “centre of order, the balm of distress, and the mirror of beauty” (122), allowing those around her, namely those hardened and battered men, a safe haven. However, though Ruskin does deal heavily in the language of “inner” and “outer” worlds, the “hearth” and the “gates,” his concept of “home” is not necessarily tied to that of the “house.” When he imagines his Queen home-making, it is not in the kitchen or the parlor, but, as the title of his essay proclaims, outdoors in a “garden.” The “Queen's Gardens” which Ruskin describes serve a specific metaphorical and political purpose. When he describes the “outer world” separate from the domestic sphere (102), it is as dark and decayed. He equates the “darkness of the terrible streets” with a desolate wasteland, uninhabitable “rocks and moorlands” (131). When the Queen passes by, she uses her sanctifying power to convert these “moorlands” into “gardens,” cultivated and civilized spaces, “the harebells should bloom, not stoop, as she passes” (130). Here Ruskin worries about the moral corruption in the cities, the urban blight, and beseeches the adults in his audience to raise a generation of women who can heal and elevate the “feeble florets” who are “lying, with their fresh leaves torn” (131), those city-dwellers fallen to decay and indigence. However, the spatial relationships in Ruskin's metaphor are remarkable. A garden is a synthesis of the outward and the inward, a space outside yet “attached to” a home or

estate, outdoors in the wild yet cultivated. The same marriage of inner and outer is present in the Good Queen's very character. Wherever she goes, "home is always round" Ruskin's Queen (102); it is the sense of comfort and beauty that she extends to those she encounters, not the physical structure of a house. Ruskin imagines his Queen wandering, surrounded by nature, yet still safe at home:

"The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermilion, shedding its quiet light far, for those who else were homeless" (103).

That woman's "true place and power" is tied to the home, that she takes on a quasi-divine aspect at home which is otherwise lost to her, is a sentiment which scholars of the Victorian era have identified as pervasive in the literature. Both Judith Rowbotham and Gilbert and Gubar posit Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem, the "Angel in the House," as emblematic of Victorian literature's romanticizing of the home-maker (Rowbotham 15, Gilbert and Gubar 23). The poem holds that "man must be pleased; but to please is woman's pleasure" (Patmore 135). Rowbotham draws the conclusion that in daily life the Victorian middle-class understood the "good woman" as one bound "to provide her husband not just with home and all the physical comforts thereof, but also with a soothing and uncritical mental refreshment within the domestic arena" (Rowbotham 15). The spiritual, rather than mundane, dominion of the home which Ruskin conceptualizes for future women in "Of Queen's Gardens" apparently had its echo in the the personal philosophy of real Victorian housewives, as Rowbotham notes; the wife's commitment to building a home becomes an act of "self-sacrifice" (Rowbotham 19), echoing the Christlike nature of Ruskin's Queen. Similarly, as Rowbotham observes, toward the end

of the nineteenth century, the motif of the “Angel in the House” came to be replaced with that of a “Home Goddess,” whose domestic qualities develop into skills conducive to “activities outside the immediate household” (Rowbotham 12). This shift that Rowbotham observes mirrors the hopes that Ruskin holds for his future Queens, that they will travel outside the immediate confinement of the house and into the cities where their home-making skills can best be put to work. The Victorian “Good Queen,” then, is a figure who journeys outward and creates home-spaces wherever she goes.

The Good Queen is as pervasive a figure in Victorian literature as her counterpart, the madwoman or Wicked Queen. She is David Copperfield's “good Angel” Agnes, whose influence makes her “grave old house” into a “beautiful” place (Dickens 187), and who acts as a guide and intercessor on the wandering male protagonist's behalf, her “compassionate tears, her words of hope and peace, her gentle face bending down as from a purer region nearer Heaven, over my undisciplined heart, and softening its pain” (Dickens 383). Dickens in particular is attracted to this saintly character type, who reappears as *Hard Times'* Rachael and *Dombey and Son's* Florence. Alcott portrays the Good Queen in Beth March, who tells her sisters that their impoverished home is nonetheless comfortable and pleasant, as “we have Mother and Father and each other” (Alcott 7). The Good Queen is a figure with “beneficent and legal dominion” over the home-space, who “directs and teaches” (Ruskin 125) the wayward men around her, restoring order to the chaotic and fragmented places she sees.

In contrast to Ruskin's Good Queen is the Wicked Queen pictured by Gilbert and Gubar (44), who, by virtue of not being an “angel,” is a monster by default. Gilbert and Gubar, in their 1979 *Madwoman in the Attic*, piece together a master myth of Victorian

women's literature hinging on the figure of the rebellious, repressed and diseased female artist, gathering examples chiefly from realist novels. Though written with the Victorian era in hindsight by a good century, the *Madwoman in the Attic* provides a useful counterpart to Ruskin's Good Queen, a Queen who represents the urges that are sacrificed when one becomes an angelic Good Queen. Where a Good Queen exerts her purifying energy for the good of hapless, wandering men around her, the Wicked Queen's cunning "is exercised in her own behalf" (Gilbert and Gubar 28). The Good Queen's power is uniquely feminine, as Ruskin delineates the genders by claiming that "each has what the other has not" and "each completes the other" (Ruskin 101). By contrast, the Wicked Queen's talents lie in male-like "assertiveness, aggressiveness— all characteristics of a male life of 'significant action,'" characteristics which do not belong in a woman and hence become "monstrous" (Gilbert and Gubar 28). The Wicked Queen may attempt to suppress her longing for autonomy and live as an "angelic" Good Queen, but it will eat away at her from within; it "literally makes women sick, both physically and mentally" (53). Where the Good Queen heals others, the Wicked Queen sickens and suffers. The Wicked Queen's relationship with the home, the root of the Good Queen's power, is likewise corrupt. Gilbert and Gubar write that Victorian women, denied opportunities for occupation outside the domestic sphere, "were imprisoned in their homes, their father's houses; indeed, almost all nineteenth-century women were in some sense imprisoned in men's houses" (83). The home is not a space built by women for the comfort and protection of men, as in Ruskin's model; rather, built for men's benefit, it becomes men's domain in which women are "captured, fettered, trapped, even buried alive" (83). The home becomes a place of entrapment for women rather than of dominion, and instead of

order and significance, it becomes a place of chaos and confusion. Gilbert and Gubar compare the imprisoning home to a sibyl's cave, where woman— “imprisoned in, not empowered by, such caves” (95)— attempts to work her divine powers for prophecy but can only produce mad ramblings, her thoughts “scattered, fragmented, barely comprehensible” (97).

The understanding of home as a place of chaos for women is the reason that “spatial imagery of enclosure and escape” abounds in nineteenth-century women's literature (83), the reason why the figure of the Madwoman in the Attic exists. From anxiety of imprisonment in one's own room comes *Jane Eyre's* Bertha Mason, trapped in a secret attic, as well as the young Jane herself, “oppressed, suffocated” in the haunted “red-room” for her transgressions (Brontë 11). The same anxiety comes across, Gilbert and Gubar argue, in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, among others.

The contrast between characters in nineteenth-century literature who fall into the Good Queen mold and those who fall into the Wicked Queen mold is extreme. They are mirror images, each possessing what the other lacks: the one is turned inward, self-absorbed and self-destructive, the other is perpetually turned outward, giving herself away for the good of others. Those who cannot become an angel must be a monster; all women are Queens, those who are not Good Queens are necessarily Wicked ones. When Gilbert and Gubar discuss the gulf between angel and monster woman, they attempt to stage a sort of symbiosis of the two figures, writing that “every angel in the house ... is really, perhaps, a monster” (29) and supposing that even Good Queens hide a capacity for Wickedness. However, ultimately Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the two types are

mutually exclusive, as there is the implication that the Good Queen's nature is only a “pretend” facade concealing the genuine Wicked Queen nature (77) and that the two natures cannot actually coincide in one person, rather one nature is true and the other is a flimsy fabrication. However, the two natures may not be as incompatible as the *Madwoman in the Attic* supposes. Since the *Madwoman in the Attic* described the Good Queen/Wicked Queen dichotomy in 1979, various scholars have made appendages and revisions to the myth it describes, attempting to identify Victorian female character types that lie outside the binary. Heather Braun, suggesting a stock “femme fatale” character native to the nineteenth century, argues that these “fatal women” act to “challenge polarized extremes of femininity,” and, calling out Gilbert and Gubar directly, proclaims them “neither 'mad women in the attic' nor domestic servants” (111). Similarly, Thomas Fair's work on Gaskell and Keren Fite's on Alcott argue that female characters not created “according to one mold” do exist in Victorian fiction. Novels like Alcott's 1868 *Little Women* see its girl-characters not suffering from fragmented identities, shut away in their own homes, but “actuating a self that is mutually entwined with, rather than estranged from community” (Fite 177). Meanwhile Gaskell, in works like *Wives and Daughters* and *North and South*, “avoids the potentially reductive relationship” of the madwoman to her oppressor by “exploring the possibilities for freedom and self-expression for a woman in the domestic sphere of the emergent middle class” (Fair 218). What goes unspoken is that these two authors who allegedly evade the Good Queen/Wicked Queen binary have something else in common: they both wrote many books for children, particularly young girls.

Gilbert and Gubar complain about Alcott's early swerve away from writing literature for adults and her embarking on a career in children's literature, her "learning to write moral homilies for children instead of ambitious gothic thrillers" (64). However, it is in her books for girls that Alcott is able to evade depicting either Wicked Queens or Good Queens. Only twenty years after *Jane Eyre's* portrait of an attic-bound madwoman, Alcott situates the heroine of *Little Women* in an attic and describes it as "Jo's favorite refuge" where "she loved to retire with half a dozen russets and a nice book, to enjoy the quiet and the society of a pet rat who lived near by and didn't mind her a particle" (Alcott 39). Here Alcott deftly turns the madwoman myth on its head; she writes an attic that does not imprison Jo but which Jo has claimed as her own "refuge." Even the attic's intrinsically menacing properties, such as the "quiet" and the "rats," become enjoyable for Alcott's Jo— for Jo's attic is not sanitized but simply reclaimed. In a girls' novel like *Little Women*, there is room for pleasant and nonthreatening attics, as well as girls who choose to enter the attics themselves, wanting to "enjoy the quiet." The metaphorical figure who represents the middle-grounds and reconciliations possible in children's literature is the Princess, the child link between Good and Wicked Queens.

The Princess can redeem the attic because she contains the qualities of both Good and Wicked Queens, which is itself only possible because of her child status. Queenship is the position of an adult woman. This is most evident in Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens," a lecture in raising daughters which imagines Queenship as a future goal, the result of years of fine education, a "royal authority, arising out of noble education" (Ruskin 85). It is after young ladies have been trained to be "fit" for their future "duty" that they emerge as Queens (Ruskin 85). Victoria ascended the throne at age eighteen, the

same age as Jane Eyre when her adult life begins, such that her reign coincided with her “mature” womanhood. Similarly, in Lewis Carroll's 1871 *Alice's Adventures Through the Looking Glass*, queenship is an endpoint, a future goal, for the heroine, an echo of Ruskin's “Of Queen's Gardens” which Homans speculates is intentional, with Carroll parodying his fellow Oxford don's “flamboyant rhetorical tricks and his views on women” (*Royal Representations* 90). Like Ruskin's future queens, Alice must first cross the chessboard, traversing the entire land behind the looking-glass, before she can claim her “golden crown” and become “Queen Alice” (Carroll 246). Until she becomes Queen, the qualities of queenship— both Good and Wicked— reside in her as untapped potential. During her adventures, Alice meets a number of Queens she might grow up to be like, most notably the Red and White Queens whose ranks she aims to join. Laura Mooneyham White makes the case in *Through the Looking Glass*, “Carroll attacks the idea of little girls wanting to be queen” (White 113), demonstrating that when girls like Alice become queens, they “become warped by the exercise of authority,” their “perfection ... marred by a yearning after political power or even adulthood” (White 113). Perhaps this is because when girls enter adulthood and become queens they lose their Princess-like grasp upon their own power, forced into the archetypical frames of the Good or Wicked Queen.

Since she contains qualities of both Good and Wicked Queens in equal measure, the Princess has the ability to perform the role of the Wicked Queen— her madness, her creativity— in a positive and productive way. To dwell on *Alice* a little longer, Lewis Carroll's wild flights of fancy perfectly reflect the balance of the Wicked Queen's madness with the Good Queen's order and reason. Carroll's Wonderland is bursting with

characters and phenomena which seem irrational, “stuff and nonsense,” to quote Alice (Carroll 121). The land is characterized by “madness,” which the Cheshire Cat, in a conversation with Alice, defines as the complete reversal of expectations, the breaking of binaries:

Alice didn't think that proved it at all; however, she went on 'And how do you know that you're mad?'

'To begin with,' said the Cat, 'a dog's not mad. You grant that?'

'I suppose so,' said Alice.

'Well, then,' the Cat went on, 'you see, a dog growls when it's angry, and wags its tail when it's pleased. Now I growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry. Therefore I'm mad.' (Carroll 68)

Yet, as a vast body of scholarship will attest, what seems like “stuff and nonsense” to Alice and to the readers in fact is perfectly logical and reasonable. Stephen Prickett may be right when he identifies Carroll’s fairytale “madness” as “undeviating rationality pushed to its furthest and wildest extremes” (Prickett 124), and demonstrates that his writings “certainly rested upon very complex and consciously worked out mathematical structures” (Prickett 12). Leia Silvana May agrees that not only is Carroll’s world logical, it possesses a kind of “hyper-logic” in its “alien and incomprehensible” rationality (May 82). That Carroll still labels his Wonderland as “mad” although, as Susina writes, it seems “just the sort of place where a mathematician such as Carroll would feel comfortable, because it follows its own clearly prescribed set of rules” (40), lends the world of Alice’s dreams an extraordinary double nature, at once rational and irrational, mad and sane. In combining madness and rationality, Alice is not the least of Carroll’s characters; Susina describes her “constantly trying to fit into Wonderland or to fit creatures or things back into their appropriate places” (43). When Alice tries to keep

her surroundings in order by doing things like placing a jar of marmalade on a shelf while plummeting down a hole “for fear of killing somebody” (Carroll 18), she is at once performing the “sweet ordering” characteristic of the Good Queen, while adhering to the mad principles of Wonderland, certainly the domain of the Wicked Queen. In addition to underscoring the rationality that lies behind apparent “madness,” the two *Alice* stories redeem the madwoman narrative by framing “madness” not as threatening or horrifying, but as purely amusing and pleasurable, as Susina (108) and Dunisberre attest and Goldthwaite (75) contests.

Likewise, another early work of fantasy for Victorian girls by Lewis Carroll’s close friend George MacDonald,¹ *The Princess and the Goblin*, roundly challenges the motifs of the madwoman narrative. In this novel there is indeed a woman in the attic, as the heroine, Irene, accidentally discovers when she wanders up the stairs one night. Yet this woman, who sits and spins in her tower all night, is no diseased specter but a “tender grandmother” who welcomes the heroine warmly and gives her advice (Carpenter 70). Irene’s great-great-great grandmother’s ethereal goodness seems almost engineered to counter the description of *Jane Eyre*’s madwoman: “smooth and white” skin in juxtaposition with Bertha Mason’s “purple face” and “bloated features,” hair “combed back from her forehead and face” versus “a quantity of dark, grizzled hair” that “hid its head and face,” standing “straight and tall” where Bertha Mason “groveled, seemingly, on all fours” (Brontë 292). On a more meaningful level, however, the Great-Great-Great Grandmother inverts the image of the madwoman by questioning the very nature of

¹ Carpenter recounts how MacDonald and Carroll—or Charles Dodgson—were on “warm terms,” and indeed, Dodgson shared early drafts of his *Alice* works with MacDonald and his many daughters (Carpenter 57). John Docherty walks through the relationship of these two different fantasists in *The Literary Productions of the Lewis Carroll-George MacDonald Friendship*.

madness. If madness is transgressive because it lacks signification and is divorced from truth and reason (Gilbert and Gubar 31), MacDonald presents a madwoman who is a dispenser of knowledge, whose “nonsensical” fantasies are truths so real that they are not evident to the untrained eye.

Like the *Alice* stories’ Cheshire Cat, the Great-Great-Great Grandmother speaks in riddles, yet it is clear that what seems like nonsense to Irene does in fact make a great deal of sense, which Irene is simply not yet equipped to comprehend:

“Wouldn't you like to know who I am, child?”

'Yes, that I should—very much.'

'I'm your great-great-grandmother,' said the lady.

'What's that?' asked the princess.

'I'm your father's mother's father's mother.'

'Oh, dear! I can't understand that,' said the princess.

'I dare say not. I didn't expect you would. But that's no reason why I shouldn't say it.'" (MacDonald 20)

Speaking madness, exposing Irene to things she cannot be expected to understand, encourages the princess to think— like Alice “puzzling”— and reach conclusions in new ways. After several exchanges like the one above, where Irene questions her Great-Great-Great Grandmother but is only given strange, elusive responses, she gradually becomes capable of understanding the old woman's thoughts and answering her own questions. When she asks her Great-Great-Great Grandmother what she eats, living alone in the attic, her Grandmother simply asks, “What did you have for breakfast this morning?” which prompts Irene to answer her own question: “Oh! I had bread and milk, and an egg—I dare say you eat their eggs” (22). This riddling, nonsensical parley actually

enables Irene to consider things from new perspectives and see things she did not have access to before.

Indeed, in MacDonald's novel, that which many people take to be madness is merely an acute vision, the ability to discern truths that others cannot. When Irene attempts to tell others about her encounter with the woman in the attic, they dismiss her as speaking “nonsense” (25)— though Irene, and the readers, know that they speak out of ignorance and that Irene is telling the truth. Irene's “nonsense,” her madness, marks her as wise, even enlightened; as Rigsbee writes, “being able to see a fantasy place is the product of believing in its existence, a belief which indicates special gifts of imagination and spiritual vision” (10). Her madness corresponds to a highly Romantic understanding of imagination, an ability to grasp the “manifestation of something beyond the present and tangible object” (Shelley 2.47). These things “beyond the present and tangible object” are nonetheless true, or even truer than true. That Irene is not fantasizing when she meets her Great-Great-Great Grandmother is quite clear, as “a real princess cannot tell a lie” (27), rather, she sees the truth far more clearly and on a more meaningful level than normal people.

A truth that is truer than true is the basis for “fantasy” as George MacDonald understands it. In the epigraph to his 1858 *Phantastes*, MacDonald describes fantasy as “narratives without coherence but rather with association like dreams” — compare this lack of coherence with the nonsense of *Alice* and the “scattered” thoughts of the madwoman— and that they “can at best have an allegorical meaning in general, and an indirect effect like music” (Carpenter 73). Jackie Wullschläger considers Victorian children's fantasy an exercise in escapism, blotting out reality and truth in favor of pure

illusion (65)— a madness, as it were. MacDonald's understanding, meanwhile, conceives it as truth expressed on an “allegorical” and “indirect” level. Fantasy *suggests* truth, prompting readers to grasp the truth with their own minds, in the same way that the Great-Great-Great Grandmother's riddles *suggest* truth and enable Irene to find the answers to her own questions. There is, therefore, method to MacDonald's madness.

It is tempting to categorize our argument that the Wicked and Good Queens are not necessarily exclusive as a Derridan “deconstruction,” a reading that simply destabilizes the preordained binary of Good Queen versus Wicked Queen. However, I would rather term what I am doing a “reconstruction.” The Queen has already been broken into pieces, one Wicked and one Good. By revisiting the figure of the Princess we can see her as a complete whole, Good and Wicked Queens in one being, and hence understand how she can be healed again.

Published in 1905, *A Little Princess* tells the story of Sara Crewe, a spoiled girl who, following the death of her rich father and fall into poverty, comforts herself by imagining fanciful stories of princesses and dungeons, “pretending” that she is living in a romance. These stories gradually begin coming true, at times through the effort of Sara and the people around her, and at times through an inexplicable sort of magic. *A Little Princess* is a narrative that thrives on gray areas and “in-between” spaces, joyfully blurring fantasy and reality, madness and reason, the polarized qualities of the Good and Wicked Queens. Burnett situates her heroine in the role of the madwoman, shut away in an attic, physically wasting away and living in a world of dreams. Yet at the same time, she equips Sara with the angelic capacity for ordering, beautifying and healing that is characteristic of the ideal Victorian lady. Where a Carroll or MacDonald simplify

madness into nonsense and salvation into education, Burnett depicts the character of the Wicked Queen and the Good Queen in their most extreme forms, yet demonstrates how these discordant natures can be reconciled in one person, and are, in fact, more powerful and helpful when combined than when separate. Sara lives in a state of dreaming, calling to mind the “nonsense” of MacDonald's princess and Alice's “believing impossible things” (Carroll 192). Pretending, Sara declares, is “so easy that when you begin you can't stop. You just go on and on doing it always. And it's beautiful” (*Little Princess* 28). Sara's “pretends” are the perfect synthesis of madwoman and angel, Good and Wicked Queen; like the Wicked Queen who cannot escape her dangerous preoccupation with the illusions in her looking-glass, Sara “can't stop” pretending, but like the Good Queen, who blesses her surroundings with “adornment,” she finds the madness “beautiful.”

In her confrontation of the madwoman narrative, Burnett does not destroy the formula. She retells the story of Lilith, Little Snow White's Stepmother and Bertha Mason in a straightforward manner, including all its usual hallmarks, but approaches it from a different perspective, one that leaves room for a triumphant, comic ending. She does not “kill” both woman-as-angel and woman-as-monster, as Gilbert and Gubar prompt authors to do (17). Instead, by having one character, Sara Crewe, perform the roles of both Good and Wicked Queen, Burnett rescues angel and monster alike. Her Wicked Queen no longer dreams of chaos and confusion but of truth and beauty. Her Good Queen no longer wastes away but uses her grace and power to strengthen herself and others. Burnett's program is one of redemption and renegotiation, not destruction.

Scholarship on *A Little Princess* has largely sought to situate the novel in its wider historical context. The longest and most thorough study of the *Princess*, Roderick

McGillis' *A Little Princess: Gender and Empire* (1996), reads Sara's tale as a “reworking of the Crusoe story in terms of female experience” (8)— that is, where Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* theorizes man's role as an imperial subject, *A Little Princess* theorizes woman's. If McGillis aligns Sara Crewe with any aspect of a Wicked Queen-Good Queen dichotomy, it is the Good Queen, as he pictures Burnett depicting “the female as nurturer, a dispenser of largesse and a person willing to sacrifice for others, especially for men” (11). If men further the empire by adventuring around the world, then women further it by tending the hearth, Penelope-like, at home in England. McGillis imagines that Burnett champions this feminine, domestic imperialism above aggressive, masculine imperialism abroad, but that, ultimately, she does “sympathize with England's imperial designs” (11), a fact I shall contest in Chapter 3. A section on *A Little Princess* in M. Daphne Kutzer's *Empire's Children: Empire and Imperialism in Classic British Children's Books* (2002) continues where McGillis leaves off, envisioning the entire novel as an extended metaphor for the relationship between India and England, with every hierarchy in the book echoing the two nations' struggle.

U.C. Knoepflmacher returns to the *Princess* a number of times, mapping its fairy tale roots (Knoepflmacher, “Literary Fairy Tales” 29) and its relationship with “adult” Victorian literature (Knoepflmacher, “Introduction” 239). Interestingly, he omits it from his great interrogation of Victorian children's fantasy, *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairytales and Femininity* (1998), in which he establishes a conflict between male and female Victorian fantasists. The men, he argues, are “eager to blur and dissolve sexual differences” and differences of age, agency and authority, rebelling against the set nature of things and reveling in nonsensical escapism (25). The women, on the other

hand, are “more likely to insist on the reality,” approaching fantasy with an eye to instructing girls how to succeed in the real world (25). Overlooking *A Little Princess*, a thoroughly feminine novel which not only dramatizes the escape from reality via fantasy but in fact blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy itself, deprives the study of some nuance. Knoepfmacher does visit Burnett (through *The Secret Garden* and the short story “Behind the White Brick”) in an article which reiterates the male-fantasist versus female-fantasist paradigm of *Ventures into Childland*, noting that Burnett accesses the masculine, Carroll-esque mode of “playful anarchy” which accounts for the openly “aggressive” heroines in her works (Knoepfmacher, “Little Girls Without Their Curls” 14). Still, *A Little Princess*' participation in a genre that celebrates “pretends” and “nonsense” without a thought to the “caution” Knoepfmacher attributes to lady fantasists should not be overlooked (25).

In one of the most recent pieces of scholarship on *A Little Princess*, Sanders dedicates a chapter in *Disciplining Girls: Understanding the Origins of the Classic Orphan Girl Story* (2011) to detailing the balance of Sara's personal authority via her storytelling abilities and her deference to her father's authority (78). Even though her father appears only briefly in the novel, Sara feels his presence constantly and acts as he would expect, because “her heart beats with the impulses it has learned from his” (80). In this thesis I shall take the relationship between Captain Crewe and Sara to task, interrogating the balance of power which Sanders accepts here— for Sara's relationship with her absent father transforms steadily, and his influence upon her is not always a positive one, despite the closeness of their hearts.

The first chapter of this thesis, “I Pretend I Believe: The *Princess* Before the

Attic” describes Sara as a textual being, her relationship with “pretending” and storytelling which necessarily extends from her relationship with her father. Using *The Madwoman in the Attic's* theory of the “anxiety of authorship” as a structural framework, I argue that the stories Sara tells early in the novel for the entertainment of her friends are not yet representative of Sara's true capacity for imagination. Rather, these stories are controlled, contained and carefully engineered not to overstep their boundaries as texts beholden to the authority of her literary forefather, that is, the patriarchal figure Captain Crewe.

The second chapter, “It Was The Day The Dream Came True: The Opposite Side of the Attic,” demonstrates what Sara's imagination is capable of when she is removed from her father's influence. It continues to probe the *Madwoman in the Attic* narrative by honing in on what the attic as a space signifies; using Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* to reach an understanding of how children in particular experience domestic spaces and how this differs from an adult's experience, I shall juxtapose this “child's space” the spiritual, invisible “home” of Ruskin's Good Queen and the dungeon “home” of the Wicked Queen. The chapter goes on to examine the symbiosis of Good and Wicked Queen in Sara's imaginative “supposes,” revealing that the combination of these polarized natures grants Sara enormous power, which she must decide to use wisely.

The imagination of the girls' novel heroine, be it Alice's “puzzling” about someone's “extraordinary way of living” or Sara's “pretends,” is an avenue for both polarized aspects of the Victorian woman's psyche to come together. This fanciful process combines the chaotic irrationality of the Wicked Queen with the instinct for order-making and adornment which is emblematic of the Good Queen, doing away with

the anxiety, the abstraction from self and the destruction that plagues the adult Victorian heroine. Like the narrator of Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," who returns to the idyllic scene of his youth and discovers "strength in what remains behind" of his childhood innocence (Wordsworth 185), it is by returning to girlhood that the figure of the Victorian novel's fragmented Queen can find redemption. Victorian girls' literature is often understood as a genre fueled by a "longing for childhood" (Wullschlager 3), devised by the (male) author as a way of "reconnecting with his lost self" (Robson 3) and of countering the "incompleteness" of adult male life by invoking "childhood and femininity as restoratives" (Knoepfmacher, *Ventures into Childland* 11). Yet this literature has an even more obvert restorative function for adult female readers and writers, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett. Girlhood represents a moment before maturation forces the woman to choose between life as a Wicked or Good Queen, when the two queenly aspects exist in conjunction; revisiting this moment through literature allows the woman reader, Wordsworth-like, to reclaim her girlhood strength. Recalling a time when she was a Princess capable of doing whatever she "supposed," the fractured Queen can be reborn.

CHAPTER II

I PRETEND I BELIEVE: THE *PRINCESS* BEFORE THE ATTIC

“She went up the last flight of stairs with a lump in her throat and tears blurring her sight. There would be no fire to-night, and no rosy lamp; no supper, and no princess sitting in the glow reading or telling stories—no princess!” (241) This sorrowful reverie comes near the end of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s 1905 novel, *A Little Princess*, after the heroine, imprisoned for years in the attic above a school for privileged girls, is set free. Her friend, returning to the empty attic, reminisces about the desolate space as it once was, when Sara was there to make it cheerful and comfortable, and in doing so she deconstructs one of the crucial motifs of the Gilbert/Gubar *Madwoman* narrative, the titular attic itself. The attic, the cave, the private room with its yellow wallpaper, the space where the madwoman is imprisoned, is the image at the heart of the master-myth of Victorian women’s literature. It represents the Victorian woman’s torment, dramatizing her entrapment within the expectations of male society and male art. It is dark and mysterious, because the madwoman, abstracted from her own self and unable to “see” her true self, cannot “see” her home around her, either. There is no escape from the attic prison, short of the sort of disaster figured in *Jane Eyre*, where leaping from the top of a burning house ensures the destruction of madwoman and attic together. Yet Sara’s attic avoids all of these signifiers of madness and doom. The heartbroken Becky remembers Sara’s attic as full of light, recalling the “glow” of the “fire” and the “rosy lamp.” It is a peaceful place where the girls can see clearly and feel warm and comforted. And where the madwoman is trapped in the attic for life, there is a way out of Sara’s attic; eventually Becky will return to find “no princess,” the attic’s prisoner freed.

Writing about Burnett's other orphan-girl novel, the 1911 *Secret Garden*, biographer Phyllis Bixler writes that the author "transforms" the "motifs of despair into images of female celebration" (100), a statement that is certainly true of the treatment of the attic in *A Little Princess*.² This transformative task, which turns the most essential stock images of Victorian women's literature on their head, is possible through the power of narrative. Becky remembers the attic as comfortable and lovely, but what she focuses on the most intently is the "princess" herself, "reading or telling stories." Storytelling, or, the word that Burnett uses, "pretending," is Sara's strength, and the method by which she transforms both her attic and her narrative genre. Imagination takes on a magical quality in *A Little Princess* as the "pretends" Sara invents and the possibilities she dreams of have a tendency to become true; she is able to use her "pretends" to turn the ghastly attic into a warm and "glowing" home, but also to turn the tragic *Madwoman* story which she reenacts into a comic one. Her attic then becomes not a place of exile but of comfort, the madness becomes the imagination necessary to dream of bright futures, and the Wicked Queen becomes a Little Princess.

Burnett first realized *A Little Princess* as a serialized novel, *Sara Crewe: Or What Happened at Miss Minchin's* in 1888. This earlier version of the tale begins *in media res* with Sara already imprisoned in the attic, destitute and relying on her fantasy life to survive, yet in the later publication, 1905's *A Little Princess*, the story begins years before Sara's fall from fortune. In the early scenes of the more fully developed 1905 novel, Sara exhibits an ambivalent attitude toward her own imagination. Though she is a

² Bixler here draws the connection between Gilbert and Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* narrative and *A Secret Garden*, and many other scholars have followed suit, usually focusing on Burnett's creative debt to Charlotte Brontë and *Jane Eyre* (Silver 193; Seelye 234). Studies of the even more obvert *Jane Eyre* and *Madwoman* parallels in *A Little Princess*, however, are far less popular.

girl who is “always dreaming and thinking odd things” (*Little Princess* 1), Sara nonetheless is guarded with her “pretends,” carefully delineating her fanciful stories from reality and dutifully asserting her authority over her own imagination. The reason for this is her connection in the early chapters with her father, a figure of military and patriarchal authority, whose very presence prompts Sara to adhere to a rational mindset and keep her fancy in check.

Early in the novel, Sara’s “pretends,” her benign madness, are kept carefully under control; she consistently curbs her moments of reverie with a strict understanding of the boundary between dream and reality. In one scene she tells her friend Ermengarde how she imagines her doll Emily “can read and talk and walk, but she will only do it when people are out of the room” (17), adding, “At least I believe she can. At least I PRETEND I believe she can. And that makes it seem as if it were true. Have you never pretended things?” (27) Sara’s “pretending” functions on several levels: her imagination crafts an unbelievable story about dolls who can read and talk, and it also creates the Sara who believes in her own story—“I pretend I believe.” In this passage, Sara carefully asserts that she speaks from a place of rationality. Even when she seems most swept away by irrational fancies, it is only a performance; she only “pretends she believes” and the fanciful Sara is as much a fiction as the stories of magic she tells. Behind the façade, Sara always maintains a firm understanding of truth and rationality.

When Sara and Miss Minchin first meet, Miss Minchin’s flattery of her new pupil prompts Sara to reflect on truth versus untruth:

“It will be a great privilege to have charge of such a beautiful and promising child, Captain Crewe,” she said, taking Sara’s hand and stroking it. “Lady Meredith has told

me of her unusual cleverness. A clever child is a great treasure in an establishment like mine.”

Sara stood quietly, with her eyes fixed upon Miss Minchin’s face. She was thinking something odd, as usual. “Why does she say I am a beautiful child?” she was thinking. “I am not beautiful at all. Colonel Grange’s little girl, Isobel, is beautiful. She has dimples and rose-colored cheeks, and long hair the color of gold. I have short black hair and green eyes; besides which, I am a thin child and not fair in the least. I am one of the ugliest children I ever saw. She is beginning by telling a story.”

...

“I should be telling a story if I said she was beautiful,” she thought; “and I should know I was telling a story. I believe I am as ugly as she is—in my way. What did she say that for?” (6)

Again, Sara positions herself in a rational standpoint; she “knows” when she is “telling a story” because she can discern fiction from reality. She understands stories for what they are, knows their limits and can create them—and end them—at will. That is to say that she can contain and control her “stories” in the same way that the rational mind controls madness, the civilized colonizer controls the colonized, or hyper-rational man controls irrational woman.³

“Stories” need to be controlled in this scene because there is an element of transgression attached to “stories”—Sara is deeply offended that Miss Minchin, calling her “beautiful,” is “beginning by telling a story” (6); here storytelling is tantamount to lying, deceptive. This line is only the third instance of the word “story” in *A Little Princess*, following “she liked books more than anything else, and was, in fact, always inventing stories of beautiful things and telling them to herself” only a scant few paragraphs before (4). That Burnett uses the phrase “telling stories” to describe both the

³ On the enforced rationality passed from Captain Crewe to Sara: grooming daughters toward sober and rational mindsets is hardly unusual for a Victorian father. Ruskin encourages parents to educate their girls to be “not more, but less frivolous” than boys, characterized by “qualities of patience and seriousness” and kept “in a lofty and pure element of thought” (111).

secret pastime Sara loves and the public deceit that she deplores should not be overlooked; the repetition in both passages of the word “beautiful”—“beautiful things” versus “beautiful child”—only serves to make the connection stronger. The juxtaposition of the two passages highlights Sara’s ambivalence toward stories and “pretends” which she will re-negotiate throughout the novel.

In these early passages—Sara’s introduction to the reader and Miss Minchin, as well as her conversation about dolls with Ermengarde—Sara’s ambivalence hinges not upon the nature of the stories being told but upon the nature of the telling itself. Sara’s stories are initially characterized as private exercises; when she imagines “stories of beautiful things” she tells them only “to herself” (4). When she shows Ermengarde her bedroom, she explains that she likes to live alone because “when I play I make up stories and tell them to myself, and I don’t like people to hear me. It spoils it if I think people listen” (26). Her stories are, essentially, not meant to be told; Miss Minchin’s “telling a story” is crass because she is voicing it aloud and being heard. By recognizing that stories have a place, that they are confined to a private, domestic space completely removed from the public sphere, Sara further asserts her control (as a rational-minded being) over irrational fantasy. She delineates the privacy of the “playroom” as the place for the irrational, the deceptive and the untrue, while the public is the place for mannerly order. Like the medical establishment trapping the heroine of Gilman’s “Yellow Wallpaper” in the bedroom, or Mr. Rochester hiding his madwoman in the attic, Sara contains her own “madness,” her fanciful “pretends,” in her secluded “playroom” (*Little Princess* 26). Her “pretends” are controlled, shut away, mastered.

Yet Sara's repression of her imagination is not a sign of her own mastery over her own mind. Rather, just as the madwoman's imprisonment—be it Bertha Mason's or the young Jane Eyre's—is at the hands of a male father or lover, Gilbert and Gubar's "righteous and punctual patriarch" (598), the imprisonment of Sara's imagination is the will of her beloved papa, Captain Crewe. That Captain Crewe is controlling Sara is barely evident to the reader; in the novel's first pages Burnett writes that though Sara generally keeps her stories to herself, "sometimes she had told them to her father, and he had liked them as much as she did" (4). Indeed, Captain Crewe is a storyteller himself, "attracting" Sara to accept her duty to leave India and go to school with "stories of the voyage and the new country" (3). Yet it is this very command of storytelling that makes Captain Crewe the commander of Sara's imagination. To refer once again to Gilbert and Gubar, Captain Crewe is the male author who wields the phallic pen—that is storytelling, the "creative gift" which is a "male quality"—with authority (Gilbert and Gubar 3). Sara's little, feminine narratives must adhere to his master-narratives or else suffer the fear that she cannot "fight a male precursor on 'his' terms and win," that is, the "anxiety of authorship" (Gilbert and Gubar 49).⁴

⁴ Gilbert and Gubar conceptualize the "anxiety of authorship" as a feminine foil to Harold Bloom's Oedipal "anxiety of influence" theory. Bloom describes literary inheritance as a Freudian "family romance" (Bloom 8) in which the (male) poet understands his inspirations and predecessors as "Poetic Fathers" against whom he struggles jealously for the love of a female "Muse" (Bloom 37) just as in Freud's Oedipal struggle, the Son destroys the Father for the Mother's love. The artist's resentment toward his Poetic Father and fear that he may lose the Muse to his powerful predecessor forms the "anxiety of influence." Gilbert and Gubar, meanwhile, carve a niche for the female artist in Bloom's model separate from her male counterpart. Where Bloom's male artist sees in his Poetic Father all that he wants and aspires to be, Gilbert and Gubar's female artist is unable to place herself in the Poetic Father's "significantly different" person or his "definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of self" (Gilbert and Gubar 48). Her alienation from the Poetic Father makes her unable to envision herself inheriting his literary authority, and she experiences a "radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor'"—that is, a figure like the Poetic Father—"the act of writing will isolate or destroy her" (49). This fear is the "anxiety of authorship."

This is not to say that Captain Crewe knowingly causes his beloved daughter anxiety, or that he deliberately wishes to stop her storytelling. Burnett's narrator assures us that the Captain loves Sara's stories "as much as she did" (4); he certainly seems proud of her whimsical ideas, as he encourages her, "smiling," to tell Miss Minchin about her doll Emily (8). Elsewhere he tells Sara that she is "such fun" when she tells her "queer speeches" (5). Never cruel or even directly domineering, the Captain nonetheless serves to limit and harm Sara's character through his doting. The brief glimpses of Sara's life with her father in India depict her as contained, physically and mentally, within the walls of her father's estate. "She had always lived in a beautiful bungalow," the narrator states (3), and she is so innocent of the world that it borders on ignorance, with nearly every sentence attesting to Sara's unawareness of things: "her mother had died when she was born, so she had never known or missed her;" "she only knew she was rich because she had heard people say so;" "she did not know all that being rich meant;" "during her short life only one thing had troubled her" (2). The almost Edenic upbringing which Captain Crewe lavishes upon Sara places limits on her, for he spoils her until she cannot understand a world outside his beautiful bungalow. Hence Sara's sudden, painful remembrances of her father even in the middle of unrelated conversations (29)—her mind cannot stray far from him.

Of course, Sara is a child—naturally a good deal of her identity hinges on her father, on whom, by virtue of her age, she relies in everything. It could be argued that the controlling nature of Captain Crewe is only a product of his role as a father and is not specific to him as a character at all. Such a statement may well apply if describing a twenty-first century father and daughter, but Sara's relationship to Captain Crewe is

deeply informed by Victorian conceptions of childhood and autonomy. In *Artful Dodgers: Reconceiving the Golden Age of Children's Literature*, Marah Gubar examines the phenomenon of Victorian child actors, theorizing that through them we can understand the Victorian understanding of childhood as possessing a sort of “nonautonomous agency.” Child actors are scripted by adults; they are directed by adults; and yet they are embodied, they perform, on their own (159). This metaphor lends itself well to Sara and Captain Crewe: her dear Papa, whisked away to India in search of Diamond Mines, is like the director, the playwright, of a show, absent and invisible, yet omnipresent in the laws he has passed down. Sara, meanwhile, is the young actress, working off her father's script but, theoretically, in control of her own performance. Yet we see that she is unprepared to give her own performance, unable to embellish her father's script by breaking from rationality and allowing her “pretends” to go where they will. This theatrically-inspired view of childhood would certainly come naturally to Burnett, whose *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was one of the most successful child-centered plays of its day (Gubar 193) and who set an early version of Sara Crewe onstage as *A Little Unfair Princess* in 1903 (Thwaite 204).

Sara's upbringing is comparable to that of Burnett's other orphan heroine, Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*, as readers like Michelle J. Smith have noted (Smith 126), paying particular attention to the way life in the colonies “disorients” girls and the “Indian climate” proves “very bad” for their physical health (Smith 127). In *The Secret Garden*, living abroad, being “indulged rather than adequately guided” by parents (Smith 127) affects the character as overtly as the physical health of the heroine; it is abundantly clear that life in a lavish bungalow makes a little girl disagreeable and selfish. Sara, on

the other hand, seems relatively unspoiled, cheerful and polite in contrast to Mary's sullen mean-heartedness. Yet the few moments in the novel when Sara does behave out of selfishness or cruelty always point back to her childhood in the bungalow. Roderick McGillis comments on a scene where Sara loses her temper and strikes her doll, Emily, in rage; he notes that Burnett specifically attaches the word "savage" to Sara's behavior here (McGillis 64), calling to mind the imperial project, the Indian colony, and Sara's own Indian upbringing.

Similarly, in one of the novel's more jarring scenes, Sara rather ungratefully reflects on her life in her father's bungalow after being treated kindly by Ram Dass, an Indian Lascar. One of the few to extend kindness to Sara after she has lost her fortune, Ram Dass visits Sara in her destitute attic and, though he is manservant to a wealthy house, he does not show the filthy Sara any disrespect: he "had taken in at a glance all the bare shabbiness of the room, but he spoke to her as if he were speaking to the little daughter of a rajah, and pretended that he observed nothing" (136). The two bond quickly, with Sara immediately recognizing Ram Dass as "sorrowful and homesick," her empathy lending her an understanding of his actions, as "she felt absolutely sure he had come to look at the sun, because he had seen it so seldom in England that he longed for a sight of it" (134). Yet in spite of this immediate rapport and feeling of like-mindedness with Ram Dass, when Sara reflects on their meeting it is with a strange sense of entitled superiority, as would be expected from a callous and racist colonizer: she recalls that she "had only a few years ago been surrounded by people who all treated her as Ram Dass has treated her; who salaamed when she went by, whose foreheads almost touched the ground when she spoke to them, who were her servants and her slaves" (137). Expecting

worship from a man who just showed her kindness and struck her as a kindred spirit is most uncharacteristic of Sara—but the fact that this mean-hearted way of thinking comes in conjunction with a memory of her life in her father’s bungalow must be significant. The effect of an Indian upbringing on Sara may not differ from the effect on Mary after all; it may have degraded both of their moral characters. The harmful effects of childhood in the colonies demonstrated here may also tie into the criticism of imperialism toward which Burnett moves in *A Little Princess*, which shall be described later.

That the Captain, with only the best of intentions, restricts Sara’s capacity to imagine or tell stories becomes clear in the instructions he leaves Miss Minchin concerning Sara’s education. “I am not in the least anxious about her education,” he says (7), “The difficulty will be to keep her from learning too fast and too much. Drag her away from her books when she reads too much.” At first it is apparent in these lines, spoken with a “gay laugh,” that the Captain is exceedingly proud of Sara’s voracious reading habits. However, coupled with the knowledge that his sheltering and spoiling of Sara have literally “kept her from learning too much,” the words take on another, more sinister, meaning.

Here books, and access to books, represent the textual power which, in the Gilbert and Gubar model, fathers possess and daughters are denied. Throughout the early pages of the novel, Sara shows a distinct yearning to read and use books in the same capacity that her father does. Imagining her future, Sara hopes that one day she can become her father’s companion capable of “talking to him” as an equal—and part of becoming her father’s equal is the ability to “read his books” (3). Sara is already a great reader, but in particular she “wants grown-up books—great, big, fat ones—French and German as well

as English—history and biography and poets, and all sorts of things” (7). Her desire for “great” “big” “grown-up” books offsets the description of Sara herself as “small” and “thin” and “such a little girl” (1) as if she hopes to use these substantial books to augment her tiny body. On another level, however, the magnitude of the books signifies the weight of Captain Crewe’s textual power, which the small, frail Sara cannot emulate. She desires these “grown-up books” which signify Captain Crewe’s ability to tell stories, to understand and act upon the world around him, but cannot have them, only imagining herself reading the Captain’s books at some unspecified time in the future when she is herself “grown-up.” This causes anxiety in her—a sort of “anxiety of authorship”—which leads to her refusing to allow herself to indulge in her “pretends” too deeply, assuring herself that she only “pretends to believe” the fantasies she creates.

In the *Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar associate the qualities of the “righteous, punctual patriarch”—silencing, rewriting, controlling—with male authors, and men in general. In the case of *A Little Princess*, however, Captain Crewe’s position as one who silences and control Sara’s imagination serves a political function. Captain Crewe, the Indian officer who “kills tigers” (33) and keeps “many servants” who “say salaams” to him and his family (3) is a colonizing subject, an agent of imperialism. According to Rowbotham, it is “impossible to ignore the Empire in tales for girls” written in the Victorian era (Rowbotham 219). In *A Little Princess*, published in 1905 when the British Raj seemed secure and by an artist whose upbringing abroad in the United States exposed her to the metropolitan world of the twentieth century, the Empire is especially hard to ignore. If, as Kipling would write, it is the “white man’s burden” for Captain Crewe to capture, conquer and rebuild foreign lands, this same tendency to “colonize”

finds echo in his treatment of Sara, whom he keeps contained and micro-managed, both literally within his bungalow home and intellectually within her limited understanding of the world. Postcolonial theorists, describing the imperial subject's oppression, often do so in terms of textuality and silence, just as Gilbert and Gubar describe the stifling of the madwoman. The colonizer assumes authorship and renders the subaltern silent; "language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of 'truth,' 'order,' and 'reality' become established" (Ashcroft 7) and therefore the imperial subject sees that "great care was taken to obliterate the textual ingredient with which ... a subject could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary" (Spivak 266). The colonizing subject thus controls the hegemonic discourse and denies those colonized all access.

Captain Crewe, who stands at once for the paternal and the colonial, dramatizes the imperialist's control over hegemony—that is, authorship—in his control over Sara's imagination. Kutzer states that "children are colonized by the books they read," with adult authors "imposing adult cultural ideals" on the child readers who, "depending upon adults to describe their lives for them," are robbed of their own authority/authorship, rendered "voiceless" (Kutzer xvi). This view of children's literature is not unusual or specific to Victorian narratives, either, as Nodelman occasionally draws on postcolonial thinking to theorize the relationship between adult gatekeepers and child readers, writing that "adults offer children images of childhood that they expect children to mimic in order to be the right kind of children" and "children are not yet and not actually what adults wish them to pretend to be, which is exactly why adults wish them to pretend to be it, for their own good" in a sort of colonizing effort (Nodelman 187).

Captain Crewe's role as the textual gatekeeper, the regulator of imagination, then, is completely in accord with his other role as colonizer. The importance of empire in *A Little Princess* has not been overlooked by critics: McGillis makes it the core of his volume *A Little Princess: Gender and Empire*. Kutzer posits that models of empire in miniature form abound in *A Little Princess*, as "both the school and the Large Family function as metaphors of colonization" and within these systems Sara plays the role of a colonized object (Kutzer 49). However, Kutzer overlooks the thoroughly imperialist relationship between Sara and her father. Reimer, likewise, identifies Sara as an "imperial subject" with the "power to command others and thus to create a world that conforms to the images of her dreams," but Reimer does not explore how Sara herself begins the novel conforming to another's dream, under another's command (117). While Sara is still closely connected to her father, her stories must remain private, contained, sensible—she cannot give too much of herself to "pretend."⁵

Removed from her father's side, Sara gradually begins to indulge in her "pretends." Though she doesn't "like people to hear" her stories (26), Sara eagerly tells Ermengarde "stories of the voyage, and stories of India" and "her fancy about the dolls who walked and talked" (28). In this scene, Burnett notes, Sara "was half laughing, but there was a touch of mysterious hope in her eyes" (27)— her laughter, reminiscent of Captain Crewe's "gay laugh" as he instructs Miss Minchin to "drag her away from her books," is a stronghold against becoming lost in imagination. She can laugh at her "pretends" because she is confident that they are nothing but fantasy, yet at the same time the "mysterious hope in her eyes" signals that, against her better judgment, she does wish

⁵ For more discussion of Victorian women's literature and the *Madwoman in the Attic* in particular through a postcolonial lens, see Narin Hassan and Gayatri Spivak in *The Madwoman in the Attic After 30 Years*.

that her fancies could come true.

The way in which Captain Crewe makes his presence known to Sara in spite of his physical absence, and thereby instills a subtle anxiety in her with the constant reminders of their bond, is through the gifts he sends, many of which are books. Explaining to Sara what her school life shall be like, Captain Crewe promises, “you will go to a nice house where there will be a lot of little girls, and you will play together, and I will send you plenty of books” (3). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Sara’s playroom is that “there were pictures and books in it, and curious things from India” (48), indicating that the Captain has been sending things to read as promised. Sending books, the Captain becomes the gatekeeper of Sara’s reading habits and thereby the “author” (or one who holds authority) over her relationship with stories or “pretends.” That these gifts leave the Captain’s stamp on Sara is clear in one scene, in which Sara excitedly guesses that her father has sent books for her birthday. Though her classmates are unimpressed with the mundane gift, Sara remains enthusiastic:

“These are books, I know,” she said.
The little children broke into a rueful murmur, and Ermengarde looked aghast.
“Does your papa send you books for a birthday present?” she exclaimed. “Why, he’s as bad as mine. Don’t open them, Sara.”
“I like them,” Sara laughed, but she turned to the biggest box. (71)

Sara’s laughter echoes the voice of Captain Crewe, who, in his short role in the story, is always laughing: laughing “at her old fashioned speech” (4), laughing “his gay laugh” (7), laughing “outright” at “Sara’s queer speeches” (5), laughing at “solemn things” because, as he tells Sara, “you are such fun when you say them” (5). His gift of books is a reminder of his presence and his authority, and moreover, the books are material symbols of Sara’s inheritance.

Inheritance, as Mary Jean Corbett writes in *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, is a “patriarchal determination,” upholding the authority of the father over the daughter (Corbett 246). In *Jane Eyre*, for example, Corbett writes that “the mother stays dead but the father metaphorically lives on in the different forms of patriarchal inheritance” (Corbett 230). The books not only assert Captain Crewe’s authority over Sara but also her abstraction from any sort of mother figure and, indirectly, femininity in general. This is made clear when the narrator describes Sara in an early scene: “She did not care very much for other little girls, but if she had plenty of books she could console herself” (4). However, at Miss Minchin’s school, Sara finds herself interacting with many other women and girls, and through her growing relationships with them, she rediscovers her connection to her feminine inheritance as well as her own literary authority.

After some time spent among other girls, Sara begins sharing her stories more freely; after Ermengarde, she approaches Lottie, a much younger student with a penchant for temper tantrums, and calms her hysteria by telling her stories. Writing about the lady author’s “anxiety of authorship,” Gilbert and Gubar locate it in a discomfort with male inspirations and models and an inability to locate any female literary forbears, leaving the author alienated. In *A Little Princess*, Sara moves away from the “anxiety” her father’s presence instills in her storytelling by connecting with and emulating other women, and in her exchange with Lottie, there is a marked emphasis on mother-figures. Sara finds Lottie in the middle of a disruptive tantrum, where, consumed with pity for herself as an orphan, she is constantly wailing, “I haven’t got any mama!” (36)— to which Sara responds “Neither have I” (39). The scene draws attention to Sara’s alienation from any mother figure; in the book’s first pages it is made clear that “she had never known or

missed” her mother because “her young, handsome, rich, petting father seemed to be the only relation she had in the world” (2). Subsequently Sara's mother only appears in brief mentions as her absent “dear mamma” (20). Obviously Sara adheres to the paradigm of authorship (here, imagination and storytelling) as masculine, abstracted as she is from any female model and only aware of her father, her “only relation.”

However, by interacting with the other little girls at Miss Minchin's, Sara slowly begins to rediscover and reconnect with her absent mother. The story that she tells Lottie to calm her nerves is, in fact, about her mother, and what she imagines her afterlife in heaven is like, complete with elaborate descriptions of a city with “walls made of pearl and gold” where departed spirits “look down onto the earth and smile, and send beautiful messages” (40). Her mother, she claims, “comes out sometimes to see me—though I don't see her. So does yours. Perhaps they can both see us now. Perhaps they are both in this room” (40). As she moves away from the limits her father's influence has placed on her imagination— compelling her stories to be kept private and forbidding any entertainment of fantasies as realities— and begins sharing her “pretends” with other girls and telling stories based in her real (if unusual) spiritual convictions, Sara locates her mother and recognizes her presence near her. The mother she had “never missed” is now watching over her. As soon as she identifies this, Sara can take her mother as a muse or inspiration for her stories, the same process that Gilbert and Gubar set out in the *Madwoman* as the woman author battling “the loneliness of the female artist” (50) by “actively seeking a female precursor” (49). In Gilbert and Gubar's model, the female artist must search for her lost mothers— woman authors of the past who have been forgotten or dismissed by the canon and its gatekeepers— in order to break away from

her alienating and controlling literary forefathers and “legitimize her own rebellious endeavors” (50). In her storytelling at Miss Minchin’s, Sara begins to draw upon the influence of her lost mother, recreated now in her imagination; she closes her story for Lottie with, “I will be your mamma ... We will play that you are my little girl” (41). Sara’s becoming a mother emphasizes the growing distance between herself and her father, as she ceases to see him as “the only relation she had” and finds inspiration and outlet for her imagination in other, feminine relationships. This signals her move toward an unrestrained and dangerous mode of imagination— that is, madness.⁶

The story that Sara tells about her mother is born out of her own honest ideas about life after death— “she had been told that her mamma was in heaven, she had thought a great deal about the matter, and her thoughts had not been quite like those of other people” (39). Even in the telling, it is clear that Sara’s “pretend” is more than fiction. Lottie notices: “She had been told that her mamma had wings and a crown, and she had been shown pictures of ladies in beautiful white nightgowns, who were said to be angels. But Sara seemed to be telling a real story about a lovely country where real

⁶ See U.C. Knoepfelmacher’s “Introduction: Literary Fairy Tales and the Value of Impurity,” which also identifies the scene with Lottie as Sara re-discovering her abstracted mother (30).

As an aside, it is worth noting that the mode of storytelling which unites Sara and her mother is a storytelling/signifying that exists outside of the sort of books that Captain Crewe sends. Sara’s mother is associated with oral communication, a more pure strain of signifying that cannot be contained in books. Sara’s first conflict with material texts occurs when Miss Minchin attempts to force her to learn French, ignorant of the fact that Sara is already perfectly fluent in the language. This redundant, unwanted instruction is described in terms of books. The irritable Miss Minchin orders Sara to begin her study with, “Take this book and look at it” (19), forcing a French workbook upon her, and when Sara attempts to protest, she snaps, “You must not say ‘but’ when you are told to do thing ... Look at your book again.” However, the narrator explains that Sara “had not learned French exactly—not out of books” (20). Rather, her education comes from pure immersion because “her dear mamma, who had died when she was born, had been French” and consequently “her papa and other people had always spoken it to her” (20). Even though Sara’s mother is only mentioned in terms of her absence—the “dear mamma who had died when she was born”—she is nonetheless associated with a form of knowledge and a storytelling that exists outside of material textuality, based in dialogue and personal negotiation rather than interaction with a physical book.

people were” (40). In Sara's story about heaven there is more than the “touch of mysterious hope” that her “pretends” could come true, rather, this “pretend” is a “real story.” Gone are the assurances that Sara only pretends that she believes her fancies, and gone is her dutiful insistence on rationality in the face of imagination. Instead of projecting fantasy upon an inanimate doll like Emily, Sara tells Lottie a story about “real people,” blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. When somebody identifies this mixture of the “real” and the “pretend” as transgressive, it is not Sara but another classmate, the hostile Lavinia, who hears Lottie's story and exclaims, “You wicked thing ... making fairy stories about heaven” (46).

Lavinia's accusation is remarkable partly because it is easy to read as a moment of self-reflection on Burnett's part. Burnett obtained a great reputation with the press as an “eccentric” (229) due to her peculiar, mystical religious beliefs. One interview with the novelist, published in the *Kansas City Post* and titled “There is No Devil, Asserts Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett,” describes her bursting out with a characteristically histrionic commentary on more sinister religious dogma: “A hell? A devil? Why my dear, you are archaic—neolithic—you are—you are, you are—rococo!” (West 251) Nor did Burnett ever shy away from allowing her theology to enter her more fantastical stories, as evidenced by works like the 1917 novella *The White People*, which, like Sara's “fairy story about heaven,” imagines life after death in terms of fairies and spirits (Bixler 81). However, just as Sara's fairy story draws judgment from a scandalized Lavinia, Burnett's mystical and occult stories about heaven did not go without controversy. In 1906, one year after *A Little Princess*' publication, the *New York Times* reported on Burnett's fairy tale “The Dawn of a Tomorrow,” stating, “One might have thought that Mrs. Burnett, in

her last story, had written a religious book, but it is so widely at variance with orthodox belief that the author was afraid even to mention it to an English publisher for the London rights” (Pendennis 240). To be “at variance with orthodox belief” is scandalous, transgressive in the eyes of mannerly London audiences, though Burnett’s comment on the “rococo” belief in hell clearly indicates that she considered her idiosyncratic beliefs as perfectly sensible. Yet as the great spinner of “fairy tales about heaven,” George MacDonald, writes in his own “princess” novel, truths which are evident to clear-eyed girls and women can seem like “nonsense” to the public (MacDonald 25).⁷ In *A Little Princess*, Lavinia’s objection clearly comes from Sara’s use of religious motifs to create her strange “pretend,” as trivializing sacred truth for the sake of fancy is profane. Sara’s act of blasphemy, which Lavinia identifies, is only a more blatant form of the blasphemy which is the source of Sara’s discomfort earlier, the obscuring of truth and pretend which occurs when Miss Minchin calls her “beautiful” or when she “pretends” things about Emily without assuring herself that it is only make-believe. However, in this instance Sara neither recoils from the union of “real” and “pretend” nor acknowledges that her “pretends” are not necessarily “real.” She responds to Lavinia’s accusation:

“There are much more splendid stories in Revelation,” returned Sara. “Just look and see! How do you know mine are fairy stories? But I can tell you”—with a fine bit of unheavenly temper—“you will never find out whether they are or not if you’re not kinder to people than you are now.” (46-7)

⁷ As Phyllis Bixler observes, MacDonald, whom Burnett met once in 1873, is a frequent presence in Burnett’s fairy tales and spiritual stories (Bixler 79); Bixler identifies *The White People* as homage to the Scottish storyteller in particular, citing its protagonist, an author of “marvelous stories,” as a shadow of MacDonald (Bixler 81). Even in her more realistic novels, however, Burnett traces certain of MacDonald’s images. *The Secret Garden*’s Dickon, who “can charm foxes and squirrels and birds” living in the moors by playing “a very soft tune on a pipe” (85) and likewise can tame and control other boys, “because a boy is an animal” (138), recalls MacDonald’s Curdie, whose song drives away the creatures from the dark woods in *The Princess and the Goblin* and who can see the animal within each person in *The Princess and Curdie*. MacDonald’s *The Lost Princess* finds echo in *The Secret Garden* as well in its spoiled-girl redemption story; incidentally Burnett would go on to publish a novel titled *The Lost Prince*.

In asserting that Scripture, understood to be the sacred truth, is itself a “story” and that her own “fairy stories” could well be true, Sara destroys the boundaries separating “real” and “pretend” in her mind— the boundaries which she had dutifully observed before. She is slipping into the transgressive terrain of madness.

In closing, Sara’s concept of her own authority is stifled by her father, who though absent makes his presence known to her constantly through his “inheritance”— the books and other gifts which he sends. Because of this, Sara is restricted in her ability to understand reality versus fantasy, truth and untruth, only able to comprehend them as polarized binaries that must never overlap. However, at the school, Sara finds herself growing more distant from this patriarchal literary inheritance and instead discovering her feminine inheritance, which encourages her to create stories, to muddle the boundaries between real and unreal. She achieves this through her relationships with girls like Ermengarde and Lottie, which allow her to rediscover her bond with her lost mother. That she moves toward her feminine relationships above her relationship with her father is evident as, later in the novel, it is not her father who provides Sara with books to read, but her friend Ermengarde. No longer receiving books from her father—her inheritance— Sara asks Ermengarde if she can read the books which Ermengarde’s own father sends unappreciatedly, in exchange for tutoring:

“I don’t want you to give me anything,” said Sara. “I want your books—I want them!” And her eyes grew big, and her chest heaved.

“Take them, then,” said Ermengarde. “I wish I wanted them—but I don’t. I’m not clever, and my father is, and he thinks I ought to be.” (176)

It is notable that Sara and Ermengarde sharing books not only disrupts Sara’s

inheritance from her father but Ermengarde's as well, facilitating Ermengarde's refusal of her father's gifts. A different inheritance, instead, is founded, one between the two girls, as Ermengarde bestows much-desired books upon Sara, and Sara in return promises to "read them—and tell you everything that's in them afterward—and I'll tell it so that you will remember it, too" (176), hence bestowing her own inheritance of knowledge back on Ermengarde. Released from her father's influence and inheritance, Sara is able to "pretend" more freely. However, given the air of transgression about the blurring of reality and "pretend," Sara's behavior also bears semblance to madness. Yet this very madness, the ability to "pretend," will protect Sara as she moves, exiled, from the safe and orderly playroom of her father's dominion and into the attic, where her own imagination runs free.

CHAPTER III

THE DAY THE DREAM CAME TRUE: THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE ATTIC

In George MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, Princess Irene wanders into the castle attic one night and meets the beautiful and wise woman who dwells there. "Do you live in this room always?" she asks, and the woman tells her, "I don't sleep in it. I sleep on the opposite side of the landing. I sit here most of the day" (MacDonald 21). Where the "third storey" of *Jane Eyre* is "narrow, low, and dim" (Brontë 65), claustrophobically small, the attic of MacDonald's novel for young girls offers the promise of an "opposite side," space to explore and occupy. Through the eyes of a child, the attic space seems larger and full of wonder. Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman narrative, which envisions the woman whose creative imagination sets her apart from silent Good Queens as driven into exile, stipulates that the attic be a space where the Wicked Queen retreats into herself, indulging in self-delusion and self-destruction. Resituating the narrative in the perspective of a little girl rather than a grown woman, Burnett offers an "opposite side" of the attic in *A Little Princess*, a side where the attic represents healing rather than disease.

When Sara is banished to the attic after her father's death, she reenacts the *Madwoman in the Attic* narrative in a way that redeems the figure of the madwoman, restoring the Good Queen's kindness and beauty to the Wicked Queen's caged creativity. It is only through releasing her imagination from the restraints her father's influence has placed on it that the redemption is possible. Without Captain Crewe, Sara's "pretends" are free to grow as they will. When news of her father's death in India arrives, it is as if Sara's anchor to rationality and the concrete is severed, such that in the early moments of

her grief “she scarcely knew that she had a body at all,” allowing her mind to run wild (92). It is oddly appropriate that the “pretends” which Sara’s father restrained while he was alive—that is, forgetting the “body,” the concrete and real in favor of the wild imagination—become her salvation after his loss. In the face of isolation, starvation and cruelty from Miss Minchin, Sara “pretends,” either devising narratives that lend her painful experiences a certain glamour, such as daydreams of being a “prisoner in the Bastille” (103), or outright wishing her awful surroundings away and imagining pleasant ones in their stead. Sara assures herself that “if I pretend it’s quite different” or “if I pretend it is a place in a story” then she can survive her ordeal (102).

Sara’s intentional escapes into “pretend” do often seem like a descent into madness, as in some scenes she seems to lose all sight of the world around her, both turning inward and turning against herself. Early in the novel, Sara, depressed by her father’s absence, declares, “If I go on talking and talking ... and telling you things about pretending, I shall bear it better. You don’t forget, but you bear it better” (30)—this passage signals that “pretending” shall become Sara’s sole method of coping with trouble. When she must confront her father’s death and her exile from the privileged life she has known, Sara therefore throws herself into “pretends” in an attempt to “bear it better.” Her attic becomes a half-imaginary space, described as “enchanted” and “a different world” (107), the magic of Sara’s fancy consuming her perception of the gloomy place. Things that are “real” likewise seem to become “pretend.” “From the attic window,” the narrator states, “the things which were happening in the world below seemed almost unreal. One scarcely believed in the existence of Miss Minchin and Miss Amelia and the schoolroom” (107). Sara’s will to “pretend” the attic is “a place in a

story” quickly escalates to the point where she no longer lives in the same world as the other characters—coming dangerously close to madness (102).

Her madness appears to be the same that Gilbert and Gubar diagnose in the creative Victorian woman; in addition to spending her days dreaming in the attic, Sara, like the young Jane Eyre projecting her feelings upon her doll and being “comparatively happy, believing it to be happy likewise” (17), becomes fixated upon her own reflection in her doll, Emily. Sara becomes more doll-like as she is moved to the attic; she is forced to become a scullery maid, the kind of girl that Miss Minchin once describes as “machines who carried coal scuttles and made fires” (*Little Princess* 69). As a “machine” girl, Sara identifies the similarly artificial girl Emily as a mirror of herself, likening the way that the doll remains silent and impassive to her own attempts to remain stoic through her suffering, pondering, “Perhaps Emily is more like me than I am like myself” (125). Similarly, Sara will often sit across from Emily to “stare and pretend about her until her own eyes would grow large with something which was almost like fear” (124). During one such scene Sara becomes increasingly disturbed by Emily’s silence, and all the while the narrator notes, “Emily merely sat upright in her old chair and stared” (125) and “there she sat” and “simply stared” (126). The scene begins with Sara “sitting” and “staring” at Emily but ends with Emily “sitting” and “staring” back at her; the two are mirrored in each other. The symbiosis of doll and girl testifies to the destruction of any difference between “real” and “pretend” in Sara’s mind, as a sawdust doll, an inanimate object created to have games of “pretend” projected upon it, takes on characteristics of a living girl, while the girl begins likening her own reticence and silence to a doll’s. Sara and Emily’s interaction finds echo in stories of other transgressive women, such as young

Maggie Tulliver punishing her fetish-doll “for all her misfortunes” in the “great attic that ran under the old high-pitched roof,” like a true madwoman (Eliot 31).

Yet while Sara exhibits these traits of the diseased Wicked Queen, she also employs the powers of the Good Queen at the same time. By specifically locating Sara in the attic, Burnett confronts the narratives that assert that women in attics can only wield their imaginations in a self-destructive or self-absorbed manner. Burnett redeems the madwoman myth in multiple subtle ways: first, Sara does not “pretend” a more chaotic or disorderly world but uses her imagination to order and govern the space around her, making it into a home rather than a prison. Second, her “pretends” do not exist only within her own mind, serving her own comfort alone, but actually manifest themselves in reality, affecting the world around her. Third, despite the fact that many of her dreams come true due to the help of hidden allies, Sara recognizes that the ability to reimagine the world is *her own* power and grows into a stronger, more authoritative, more Queenlike girl as a consequence.

Sara allows her imagination to run wild and overstep the boundaries set by her father while in exile in the attic, like the Gilbert and Gubar madwomen who, as “prisoners” both within “male houses and male texts” (Gilbert and Gubar 85) succumb to madness in various forms—“the distinctively female diseases of anorexia and agoraphobia,” “bulimia” and “claustrophobia” (85-6). For Gilbert and Gubar, the “spatial imagery” of the house, bedroom or attic is key to understanding the entrapment of the Victorian woman’s psyche. When an author like Brontë or Gilman situates her woman in the attic, this “imagery of enclosure . . . reflects the woman writer’s own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places”

(84). The madwoman-in-the-attic myth is hence a “uniquely female tradition” (85), speaking specifically to female concerns, not only “the literal reality of their own confinement” (87) but ambivalence toward the female body whose “inner space” can function as a “home” for the child (88) as well as a cultural “denial” for women “of the hope of that spiritual transcendence of the body” (88). Gilbert and Gubar essentially posit that home-spaces in nineteenth-century literature are gendered feminine, but specifically represent woman’s psychosis and hence become menacing, “negative space” (88).

Traveling out of the nineteenth century which Gilbert and Gubar recall, and shifting focus from highly symbolic female characters in fiction and onto real (or hypothetically real) female authors, Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* offers a less “negative” model of women’s relationship with their “space.” Where Gilbert and Gubar theorize that the nineteenth-century author could not escape her room, Virginia Woolf remarks that the woman writers who preceded her era did not have *enough* time in her room. Woolf’s “room” is gendered feminine—“women have sat indoors all these millions of years,” she writes (87), “so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics.” Female creativity “permeates” the room, which Woolf goes on to say must have “a lock on it” and remain properly private, an escape from the “common sitting-room” and into a state of pensive, meditative inventiveness (106). The solitary room, which we might easily imagine as an attic not unlike Jo March’s “favorite refuge,” is a much more welcoming and hospitable place for women than that which Gilbert and Gubar identify in the pages of the Victorian women’s novel. The “paradigmatic” madwoman tale, according to Gilbert and Gubar, is

Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," published in 1890 and featuring a menacing dungeon of an attic where the heroine's creative impulse goes berserk under its restraints. There must be a stepping stone between the prison of "The Yellow Wallpaper" and the creative refuge of *A Room of One's Own*, and it may be *A Little Princess*.

A Little Princess swerves away from the representations of woman's relationship with the attic highlighted by Gilbert and Gubar by introducing a child's perspective. The bond between children and domestic spaces is powerful and operates on a deep, visceral level, as demonstrated by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. When talking about houses and domestic spaces, Bachelard lingers on the perspective of a child growing up in a family home; he theorizes attics, in particular, always from the viewpoint of someone very small looking upward—"we always go up the attic stairs, which are steeper and more primitive. For they bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude. When I return to dream in the attics of yester-year, I never go down again" (Bachelard 26). Bachelard's attics are nests of dreams and imagination, where the child can be alone and allow her mind to wander. He stresses that the "boredom" which the solitary child experiences in the attic is "not the equivalent of the absence of playmates" or of imprisonment, rather, "there are children who will leave a game to go and be bored in a corner of the garret. How often I have wished for the attic of my boredom when the complications of life made me lose the very gem of all freedom!" (17) The "freedom" of Bachelard's attic is distinct from the violent "escape" from confinement which Gilbert and Gubar identify with characters in the Victorian novel, purely irrational and born out of "raging desire" (85) while Bachelard's attic, for all its daydreams and imaginings, observes a certain order: "even a dreamer dreams rationally" under "the slant of a roof"

(18). Yet Bachelard's attic also clashes with the "enclosure" and "powerlessness" of Gilbert and Gubar's attic, as interaction with the attic is a constant cycle of invention and re-invention, vision and revision, granting the child power over her surroundings. This same power is what allows Sara to experience her attic "madness" in a benign way, transforming the "negative space" into something positive.

In Bachelard's ideal, all houses become an echo of the "first house," the house where the individual spends his or her childhood; he or she experiences all houses through the lens of childhood memories, or daydreams through which "childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us"—interacting with domestic spaces then facilitates a sort of "permanent childhood" (16). Bachelard refers to the "solitude" of the attic as the "solidarity of memory and imagination" (6). He pictures an adult who remembers that he "once loved a garret, once lived in an attic" (10) and can reconstruct the image of his childhood in his mind. In reality, the attic may no longer exist, or it may be substantially different from the way he remembers, but his imagination recreates it, that is, the "dreamer constructs and reconstructs the upper stories and the attic until they are well constructed" (18).

In the attic, Sara takes part in similar acts of "reconstruction" based on the memories of the girlhood from which she has been banished. She re-imagines the attic itself, transforming it into a variety of different shapes. To Ermengarde, the attic's gloom takes on a gothic glamour as Sara describes it as a cell in the Bastille, where she has been kept "for years and years—and years" (103). Sensationalizing the morbidity of her situation is the "easiest" sort of "pretend" to accomplish, Sara claims (116), "particularly when it is cold." To Lottie, the attic becomes a home "almost like a nest in a tree" (110).

Sara entertains the little girl by identifying the potential that even the haggard attic has for comfort and warmth, imagining the room decorated with ornaments like “a soft little sofa” and “things to have tea with” (110) and cheerfully concluding that the room “could be beautiful” (111).

This reconstructive fantasy interrogates the dichotomy between the Victorian virtuous woman and the specter of the madwoman, Ruskin’s Good Queen versus Gilbert and Gubar’s Wicked Queen. The Good Queen is an “Angel in the Home” or “Household Fairy,” a “professional domestic woman, making her household a comfortable, tranquil refuge” (Rowbotham 15). As discussed earlier, Ruskin’s vision of the Good Queen in *Sesame and Lilies* is that of a home-maker, that is, not just a woman who tends to her household but one who transforms every place she touches into a “home,” which means something more specific to Ruskin than a mere house.

This is the true nature of the home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home. (102)

Sara performs the role of Ruskin’s Good Queen admirably in her attic, veiling it in beautifying “pretends” such that the dreaded “outer life” scarcely crosses her mind, and “the things which were happening in the world below” become “almost unreal” (*Little Princess* 107). Reinventing the room as a charming home (for Lottie) or a romantic cell in the Bastille (for Ermengarde,) Sara rebuilds it as a space completely under her own dominion, each detail sprung from her own mind, which “the hostile society of the outer world,” be it the reality of her shabby living conditions or a

controlling father, has no influence over. Ruskin describes the Good Queen as a “Domina,” the feminine equivalent of “Dominus” which he translates literally as “House-Lord” (125); lordship (or authority) and the house go hand-in-hand for the Good Queen. Before the attic, Sara’s authority was limited to stories divorced from reality as she deferred to the ultimate authority of her father. However, here she exercises her lordship as a “Domina” over the very form of her Home space. Ruskin goes on to describe the ideal home as:

a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods, before whose faces none may come but those whom they can receive with love – so far as it is this, and roof and fire are types only of a nobler shade and light—shade as of the rock in a weary land, and light as of the Pharos in the stormy sea—so far it vindicates the name, and fulfills the praise, of Home. (102)

Again he emphasizes the conversion of ugly and inhospitable places to beautiful ones, which fits Sara’s interaction with her attic perfectly. The Good Queen who has “love” in her mind can make a true home of any place, transforming “weary land” and “stormy sea” into a “sacred” home and hearth. Sara fulfills this office when she rebuilds her attic in her mind, proclaiming that “it could be beautiful” (*Little Princess* 111). The means by which she works her Good Queen-like “home-making” is her imagination, her irrational disconnect from the real which would normally mark her as a Wicked Queen. However, in claiming the madwoman’s attic as her home, Sara synthesizes both the powers of the beautifying Good Queen and the creating Wicked Queen, redeeming the madwoman. Normally the Wicked Queen, banished to a shadowy garret far from the warmth of the parlor and kitchen, is the farthest thing from “domestic” possible, yet Sara, seated on the Wicked Queen’s throne in her dreaming attic, operates fluently as a literal

“home-maker,” claiming the forbidden attic as a home fit for decoration and care. McGillis describes her creating “civilized living space in a modern urban wasteland” through her “pretends” in the attic (McGillis 13), and indeed Sara functions as a civilizer, domesticating the attic’s wild rats and sparrows, converting the space into a home.

In the early sections of the novel, Sara is characterized as not yet ready for domesticity; she hopes someday to “take care of papa,” to “keep the house for her father, to ride with him, and sit at the head of his table when he had dinner parties” (3), playing the role of the domestic angel, but she is sure she will not be ready for this responsibility until she has gone to school “to attain it” (4). Sara’s talent for “keeping house” only manifests when her connection with her father is severed, despite the fact that being by his side previously motivated her to cultivate this same talent. Again, Sara’s ability to “home-make,” to recreate the attic as a home space, is a product of her unfettered imagination, which had not been able to run free under Captain Crewe’s influence.

Sara occupies a space between the titles of irrational Wicked Queen who, like Plath’s “mad girl,” dreams a chaotic and morbid world into existence, and rational Good Queen who, per Ruskin’s description, creates order out of fragmentation. The functions of these two roles blend together inextricably as, mysteriously, the things which Sara dreams begin to pass from her elaborate “pretends” and into concrete reality. It begins subtly, with hints of Sara’s voice overtaking the narrator’s, and narratives from Sara’s imagination creeping into the main body of the novel. In the chapter “Melchisedec,” Sara encounters a rat in her attic and begins thinking her usual “queer thoughts,” casting the creature as a fairy tale character, “like a gray-whiskered dwarf or gnome,” and then devises a personality and story for him (112):

“I dare say it is rather hard to be a rat,” she mused. “Nobody likes you. People jump and run away and scream out, ‘Oh, a horrid rat!’ I shouldn’t like people to scream and jump and say, ‘Oh, a horrid Sara!’ the moment they saw me. And set traps for me, and pretend they were dinner. It’s so different to be a sparrow. But nobody asked this rat if he wanted to be a rat when he was made. Nobody said, ‘Wouldn’t you rather be a sparrow?’”

She had sat so quietly that the rat had begun to take courage. He was very much afraid of her, but perhaps he had a heart like the sparrow and it told him that she was not a thing which pounced. He was very hungry. He had a wife and a large family in the wall, and they had had frightfully bad luck for several days. He had left the children crying bitterly, and felt he would risk a good deal for a few crumbs, so he cautiously dropped upon his feet. (112)

Here we see an intersection of Sara’s diegetic voice with the narrator’s epic voice.

In the preceding sentences, the creature is just a “large rat,” an animal who behaves on instinct as an animal would, “sitting up on his hind quarters and sniffing the air in an interested manner” because the “scent” of breadcrumbs on the floor “had drawn him out of his hole” (112). However, in this passage, as soon as Sara begins to imagine him as a creature with feelings and a sense of justice, the narrator immediately begins to follow suit, describing his “courage” and sense of duty, his willingness to “risk a good deal for a few crumbs.” The narrator similarly echoes Sara’s word choice. Sara’s reverie trails off with “wouldn’t you rather be a sparrow?” and, in the second sentence of the next paragraph, the narrator responds, “perhaps he had a heart like the sparrow.” In the same way, the narrator goes on to say that “the rat knew” that Sara “would not jump up and terrify him with wild, sharp noises or throw heavy objects at him” (112), as if the events the narrator describes are following the script which Sara sets out when she wonders if he might be nervous about people who “jump and run away and scream out” in the above passage. Above all, however, the narrator’s voice takes on a decidedly Sara-like quality

in this scene. Describing the way that the rat knows he can trust Sara, the narrator embarks on a bout of whimsical meditation:

“Come on,” said Sara; “I’m not a trap. You can have them, poor thing! Prisoners in the Bastille used to make friends with rats. Suppose I make friends with you.”

How it is that animals understand things I do not know, but it is certain that they do understand. Perhaps there is a language which is not made of words and everything in the world understands it. Perhaps there is a soul hidden in everything and it can always speak, without even making a sound, to another soul. (112)

The narrator’s “perhaps” is the crux of the paragraph; it sees the narrator herself “pretending,” conceding that she does “not know” something but considering it deeply anyway, imagining things contrary to fact. Even the matter of the narrator’s “pretend,” the ability of animals to understand human speech, mirrors Sara’s own “pretends,” as earlier in the novel Sara remarks about her doll: “suppose she understands human talk and feels proud of being admired” (72). Sara’s “pretend” becomes the narrator’s “pretend”—but of course the narrator’s voice represents the reality within the novel, and in a way, the narrator’s “pretend” becomes reality.

The word which triggers the narrator’s “perhaps” and the narrator’s “pretend,” however, is “suppose,” in the last sentence Sara speaks before the narrator takes over: “Suppose I make friends with you” (112). The Melchisedec scene opens with Sara acutely aware of the grim reality of her surroundings:

The enchantment of her imaginings for Lottie had died away. The bed was hard and covered with its dingy quilt. The whitewashed wall showed its broken patches, the floor was cold and bare, the grate was broken and rusty, and the

battered footstool, tilted sideways on its injured leg, the only seat in the room. (111)

Yet as soon as Sara utters the word “suppose,” events take a turn for the fantastical, with “the mysterious thing which speaks without saying any words,” the mysterious “soul,” allowing girl and rat—and girl and narrator—to communicate (113). This same word, “suppose,” becomes the word with which Sara rewrites the reality around her in her own fanciful image, beautifying and ordering the world through madness, the functions of both Good and Wicked Queens combined in Sara, the Princess.

In a later scene, Sara, starving and wishing she had money for food, suddenly finds her wish comes true and discovers exactly the money she longed for on the street. Yet more than simply wishing she could have something to eat, Sara uses her imagination to plot out a detailed scene where she gains the means to feed herself. Notably, Burnett returns to Sara’s magic word from the attic, “suppose.” Sara begins each sentence of her wish with the word “suppose,” until her fantasy picks up the rhythm of a magic spell, or a prayer:

“Suppose I had dry clothes on,” she thought. “Suppose I had good shoes and a long, thick coat and merino stockings and a whole umbrella. And suppose—suppose—just when I was near a baker’s where they sold hot buns, I should find sixpence—which belonged to nobody. SUPPOSE if I did, I should go into the shop and buy six of the hottest buns and eat them all without stopping.” (156)

Sara’s “suppose,” her magic word, carries more weight even than the “pretends” she entertains early in the novel. “Suppose” is a word that dances between signifying both truth and untruth. In certain constructions, it introduces a hypothetical condition, some “imaginary case” (“*suppose*, v.”), as in the passage where the starving Sara tries to satisfy herself with one roll of bread: “Suppose it was a magic bun ... and a bite was as

much as a whole dinner. I should be overeating myself if I went on like this” (163). Here it is almost a cognate of “pretend,” Sara’s other favorite word, which at times she uses interchangeably with “suppose”—“If one was a beggar, one would have to suppose and pretend all the time” (74). Yet in other constructions it can mean “to believe in the truth of” the condition “supposed” (“*suppose*, v.”)—to use another *Little Princess* example, Sara once tells herself, “I suppose soldiers feel like this when they are on a long and weary march” (179) and elsewhere, observing the lavish home next door, thinks, “I suppose it is a rich family” (128). Obviously Sara could not say “I *pretend* soldiers feel like this” or “I *pretend* it is a rich family”—here “suppose” crosses out of the realm of the hypothetical and into the realm of belief. “Suppose” can even transcend situations or things which are *believed* to be true and describe things which are, or should be, true—or as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, which are “sufficiently probable to be practically assumed as true, or to be at least admitted as possibly true, on account of consistency with known facts” (“*suppose*, v.”). For example, when Miss Amelia would make an “inspection through the bedrooms after the pupils were supposed to be asleep” (118), “suppose” suggests a state of things being as they should be. To be “supposed to” do something is “to be practically assumed” to do it. In other uses there is an element of intention or expectation as well, as in the Shakespearean “we come short of our suppose” (*Troilus & Cressida* I.iii.10) where a “suppose” means a “prediction” or “expectation” (“*suppose*, n.”). That is to say that “suppose” is a word that operates on many levels of signification—it simultaneously refers to true things, untrue things, and the things in between.

In exactly the same way, Sara's "suppose" bridges truth and fantasy, as the things she "supposes" manifest themselves in the world around her. Immediately after uttering her mantra of "supposes," Sara does in fact find a coin (a fourpence rather than a sixpence) on the pavement in front of a bakery. This event is not staged as a mere coincidence, but rather as an instance of Sara's "pretends" becoming manifest in real life. Realizing her good fortune, Sara exclaims, "Oh... it's true! It's true!" (156) Her elation is at recognizing that the story she has told herself is not just a story at all, but "true." As in the Melchisedec passage, the moment when Sara's "pretend" intersects with the narrative's "reality" is characterized by a change in tone, as the narrator takes on aspects of Sara's own voice. After Sara's "suppose" chain, the narrator declares that "some very odd things happen in this world sometimes" (156). This line echoes the descriptions of Sara's "pretends" earlier in the novel: one of the first things said about Sara is that "she was always dreaming and thinking odd things" (1) and similarly, when Sara invites Ermengarde to her room to share her "pretends," she "sat upon the hearth-rug and told her strange things" (28). When Sara just so happens to find the very coin she'd "supposed" she might and happens to be in front of the very bakery she "supposed" she might be, the narrator prefaces this twist of fate with "if you will believe me" (157)—calling back to Sara's conflict over whether to "believe" or to "pretend to believe" her own stories. Sara's "pretends" have become a part of reality, permeating the fabric of the novel's world—the prose—just as her dreams are taking shape in reality.

That Sara's dreams really do come true when she "supposes" has been contested by various readers. McGillis holds that Sara's "pretends" are precognitive rather than transformative, that her imagination "prepares her for the marvelous things that will

happen in her life, but it does not make those things happen” (McGillis 42). He also quotes Mavis Reimer, his student at the time, who insists that “Sara’s ability to make a story of the world is not the power to make the world . . . but only the power to forget the world” (42). A reading like this, which privileges realism, overlooks the romantic fairy-tale qualities of Burnett’s novel, and also the moments where Sara’s now-true “supposes” affect the world without her knowledge. I refer not only to passages where Sara’s voice overtakes the narrator’s, but also scenes like the chapter “What Melchisedec Heard and Saw.” This chapter takes place “while Sara was out” and hence unaware of its events (166), and is told from the perspective of Melchisedec the rat. Significantly, the rat is always referred to as “Melchisedec,” Sara’s name for him, despite her absence. Even without Sara to imagine his story for him, Melchisedec retains some of his human-like personality, being “mystified” by things and “finding it dull” when the night grows too quiet (166). Similarly, the narrator returns to the question of “the mysterious thing which speaks without saying any words” (113) and the quandary of animal-human communication, confessing, “How much he understood of the talk he heard I am not in the least able to say” (166). That is to say, Sara’s “supposes” do seem to have a real, lasting effect on the world outside her own imagination, and there does seem to be real Magic at play in the story.

Magic—always Magic with a capital M—is a common staple even of Burnett’s more realistic fiction, most notably *The Secret Garden*. Here Magic becomes the force that “set the seeds swellin’ and th’ sun shinin’” and that makes sick children well, as the young protagonists theorize (*Secret Garden* 161). Later they meet the wise Susan Sowerby, who explains that their “Magic” is God’s power: “It goes on makin’ worlds by

th' million—worlds like us. Never thee stop believin' in th' Big Good Thing an' knowin' th' world's full of it—and call it what tha' likes” (*Secret Garden* 161). As in *The Secret Garden*, the world of *A Little Princess* is “full of” magic. Sara often associates happy coincidences with magic; she likens kind and timely gestures from her friends to “a thing of magic,” and she declares that “somehow, something always happens ... just before things get to the very worst. It is as if the Magic did it” (*Little Princess* 186). “Magic” is also used to describe Sara’s powers of imagination in general, such that when she imagines her handkerchiefs are “richly embroidered napkins,” it is “her Magic working its spells for her” (187). The force that allows her to envision unreal things and the force that brings them into reality, her process of “supposing,” is the same.

I have demonstrated that, as Sara’s relationship with her own imagination changes, so does her word usage, as she shifts from “pretending” to “supposing.” When Sara “pretends” something, “pretending” her dolls are alive and “pretending” that she is a princess, she is playing a game different from her later “supposes.” There is an element of passivity about her “pretends,” which reconsider the world as it currently is, evident in the subject matter of her fantasies, such as when Sara imagines that her doll can move and speak, “but she will only do it when people are out of the room” because, “you see, if people knew that dolls could do things, they would make them work.. So, perhaps, they have promised each other to keep it a secret” (15). When Sara imagines that Emily does not want to be made to work, she gives away her own anxiety about having to earn the things she imagines. Sara sees herself as utterly passive, all her strengths being only the product of privilege and happenstance:

“Things happen to people by accident,” she used to say. “A lot of nice accidents have happened to me. It just *happened*”

that I always liked lessons and books, and could remember things when I learned them. It just happened that I was born with a father who was beautiful and nice and clever, and could give me everything I liked. Perhaps I have not really a good temper at all, but if you have everything you want and everyone is kind to you, how can you help but be good-tempered? I don't know"—looking quite serious—"how I shall ever find out whether I am really a nice child or a horrid one. Perhaps I'm a *hideous* child, and no one will ever know, just because I never have any trials." (32)

When Sara does receive her "trials," the good things that come to her are not only "nice accidents." Before they happen, she first must be able to conceptualize them and identify them—that is, "suppose" them. When Sara "supposes" things—using a word which carries with it associations of both fantasy and reality, truth and untruth—they become true, as if she had willed it and brought it about simply by thinking about them. There is intentionality behind "supposes" that offsets the passivity of "pretends." Intentionality and authority are what distinguish the Magic behind Sara's "supposes" from the Magic in *The Secret Garden* as well. In *The Secret Garden*, Mary and her friends need guidance from Susan Sowerby, an almost fairy-godmother-like character, to understand the true nature of Magic, its all-encompassing scope and transcendence. Sara's Magic is not a remote force which she can mediate and channel occasionally; it arises from within herself. Although there are characters who assist her in bringing her Magical "supposes" to life, ultimately Sara's Magic is all her own.

The most evident human agent of the "Magic" is Mr. Carrisford, the man next door who ultimately becomes Sara's adopted father, yet who differs from Captain Crewe radically in his relationship with Sara and her imagination. His function throughout much of the novel is to use his wealth and resources to make Sara's "pretends" come true. When he learns of the stories that Sara tells to comfort herself in the cold attic, he begins

“to please himself with the thought of making her visions real things” (170). The miserable Sara recites her incantation of “suppose,” thinking, “suppose there was a bright fire in the grate... suppose there was a small table near, with a little hot—hot supper on it... suppose this was a beautiful soft bed... suppose—suppose” (196). Hours later, Mr. Carrisford sends his servants to build a “crackling, roaring little fire,” cover her bed with “new warm coverings and a satin-covered down quilt” and prepare “sandwiches and toast and muffins” in her attic (198), exactly according to her “suppose.” That all of this is done anonymously, with Mr. Carrisford preferring for Sara to “think a magician has been here” (170) than for her to know what he has done for her, is key: Sara understands these miracles as a function of her own Magic. Just as it is her Magic that allows her to imagine, for instance, an old handkerchief as a “richly embroidered napkin” by “working its spells for her” (187), Sara believes it is her own Magic filling her attic with gifts, exemplified in her confident thought, “what does anything matter when one’s Magic has just proved itself one’s friend?” (207) Not knowing her benefactor and instead understanding the miracles to come from a Magic rooted in herself strengthens Sara and gives her a sense of power in a situation when, deprived of wealth and status, she is technically powerless. In the face of the Magic, Sara is struck by her own abilities and potential: “I feel as if I might wish for anything—diamonds or bags of gold—and they would appear,” she thinks (208), and “I am LIVING in a fairy story. I feel as if I might be a fairy myself, and able to turn things into anything else.” In both of these lines Sara is the one acting, wishing things into existence, turning things into a limitless “anything else.” Mr. Carrisford has granted Sara enormous power.

In his quest to make Sara's "visions" into "real things" and situate her, mentally, as the author of her own good fortune, oblivious of his aid, Mr. Carrisford presents an inverted reflection of Sara's first father, Captain Crewe. The storytelling Captain Crewe is the model and gatekeeper of creativity for Sara; she follows his imperialistic example by limiting herself to safe, firmly make-believe stories which she rationally knows are pure "pretend." His presence is indelibly stamped upon her concept of storytelling, such that even when she is carefreely telling stories to Ermengarde, she will suddenly remember him with longing "pain" (29). The very memory of Captain Crewe, the all-powerful father-soldier-storyteller, places boundaries on Sara's imagination, her Magic. Mr. Carrisford does the opposite, not compelling Sara to recognize him and defer to his authority but instead working in secret to help her. Where Captain Crewe tells Sara stories and becomes the source of her imagination, Mr. Carrisford hears stories about the "girl-who-was-not-a-beggar" and she sparks his own imagination, causing him to devise plans to help her that are "so fanciful" that they restore emotion to "Mr. Carrisford's sad face" (243). The dour man becomes infected by Sara's imagination, and by the novel's end is constantly dreaming "to invent things to surprise her" (244)—in all of this, his imagination stems from Sara's and works to support Sara's, bringing the things that she imagines into reality. When Mr. Carrisford adopts Sara, she moves from the memory of a father who kept her in an isolated bungalow and advised her teachers to "drag her away from her books" to a father who cheerfully tells Sara, "You may do anything you like to do, princess" (247).

Curiously, Mr. Carrisford and Captain Crewe have been treated as interchangeable by readers, critics and screenwriters throughout the years. In both the

1939 Walter Lang and the 1995 Alfonso Cuarón film adaptations, the plot is rewritten such that Captain Crewe miraculously survives his disaster abroad and returns to save Sara from bereavement and poverty. Mr. Carrisford, her adopted father, is thereby replaced by the return of Sara's original father. In the same way, Joe Sutliff, writing about the novel, describes Mr. Carrisford as another Captain Crewe, or a surrogate for him, going so far as to say that "the relationship [Sara] lost with her father is recovered in Carrisford" (84). However, Captain Crewe and Mr. Carrisford are different characters who offer very different lives for Sara; the one influences and hence limits Sara's imagination where the other presents her with the power not only to imagine what she will, but to make her imagination reality. In terms of wealth and status, of course, the two characters may seem similar—Mr. Carrisford was Captain Crewe's business partner in searching for the Diamond Mines in India, until a financial disaster destroys their enterprise and costs Captain Crewe his life. Even here, however, the characters are distinct.

Captain Crewe, until he dies, is an ambitious and ascendant agent of the empire, a soldier setting out for the unknown frontier to colonize and claim. However, the search for treasure in India is disastrous; the Captain dies; the colonial project has failed. A recurring motif in the story of Captain Crewe and Mr. Carrisford's hopeless adventure is the "brain fever" which kills Captain Crewe and incapacitates Mr. Carrisford for months (144). Carrisford is "driven mad with dread and horror" at his business failures (150) and the Captain dies "delirious, raving about his little girl" (77). Essentially, Captain Crewe dies dreaming—a cruel death for a character who represents order and rationality,

compelling Sara to distinguish between “real” and “pretend” at all times. His death is like a portent of the imperial project’s ultimate failure.

Mr. Carrisford, still “very ill” when Sara first meets him (131), is a testament to the empire’s collapse, sick with delirious dreams of Diamond Mines and adventure. Burnett’s vision of the colonies, McGillis notes, is diseased and “weakening” (14). Both in *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden*, India’s harmful climate is emphasized. Sara is able to overcome the lingering colonial disease and restore Mr. Carrisford to health with her fanciful stories, as only a girl who wields “madness” as a means to create order and bring life to dead places can help a man ruined by madness to start anew. Therein lies the significance of the princess, and of Victorian girls in general, in Burnett’s ideal: girls and young women, with their boundless ability to imagine good things and make them come to life, have the power to rejuvenate a dying empire, or at least a responsibility to try.

In the attic, Sara learns that she possesses the ability to make her “pretends” manifest to comfort herself in her suffering. However, she also realizes that this ability must not be used for selfish ends alone. She feels a responsibility to project a better world for others before herself. When she miraculously finds her four-penny piece on the street, Sara is at first elated at her luck—“it is true! It is true!” (156)—but presently her sense of duty stings her when she encounters a beggar-girl on the curb, starving just as much as she is. Sara is alerted to the fact that she is situated in a London plagued by poverty and injustice, noting that the child—“one of the populace,” as she terms her repeatedly (157)—has been reduced to little more than a “poor little wild animal” (161) and that the city turns a blind eye to her plight; she “knew that if a policeman chanced to see her he

would tell her to ‘move on’” (158). Again Burnett calls attention to the futility of the empire, referring to this beggar as a “little ravening London savage” (161). Savagery, the state of ignorance and misfortune which the imperialist projects upon a colonized other, thrives in London, the heart of the empire itself. Burnett never uses the phrase “street arab,” a Victorian colloquialism for children living in the streets (Susina 99), but she conveys its meaning, the exotification and racialization of native Londoners, reimagining the disenfranchised people of England as the sensationalized “savages” of the colonies. McGillis, writing on the role of empire in *A Little Princess*, notes that Sara’s exile to the attic dramatizes London’s “reduction to a state of savagery” (67) as even the highly cultivated princess herself is reduced to poverty. When she meets the beggar girl Sara must confront this “state of savagery.” The London savage has been degraded into something less than human, a wild animal who has never “been taught politeness” (161), the “roughened black hand” that she uses to “rub away the tears” a pitiful echo of the “heart of darkness” into which imperialists abroad stare (*Little Princess* 161). Like the starving little girl reduced to a “pile of rags,” Britain is in tatters in the midst of imperialism’s collapse, and Sara feels compelled to help.

Sara’s magic, her capacity to “suppose,” is the ability that sets her, as a young girl, apart from men like her father who have failed to protect London and its beggar-girls. In the models of other novels, this Magic is witchcraft and disease, for which women like Bertha Mason are exiled. Witnessing the beggar-girl on the curb, Sara understands that she should not use her “pretends” for selfish or harmful ends, but that as a person with extraordinary abilities, she has a responsibility to help others. She is not a witch, but a princess—a fantastical figure whose chief interest is the wellbeing of “the

populace.” In the face of another’s suffering, Sara embarks on another “pretend,” this one bringing her to an ethical decision: “If I’m a princess,” she begins fancifully, and concludes that it is her place to heal and elevate those “poorer and hungrier” (158). She finds her *modus operendi* must be in the sisterly charity championed by Victorian women like Christina Rossetti (Vejvoda 562), which dictates that in an era when “fallen women” and beggar-girls like Burnett’s are everywhere, fortunate women should practice compassion and consider them their sisters. In her own life, Frances Hodgson Burnett was devoted to charity, writing in her letters about an “unfortunate family” who was “needing my attention very, very much,” going on to say, “I feel as if I want to devote every moment to them, to change their lives somehow, to sweep away the cobwebs and let in the sunshine and make things more hopeful” (Thwaite 122). Her son Vivian would later say of his mother that “her pattern was the Fairy Godmother and her guiding principle, love” (Thwaite 81), in keeping with the fantastical, fairy tale vision of charity Burnett puts forth in *A Little Princess*. Elevating fallen women and protecting sisters, likewise, is the duty of the Queen in Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens,” where he describes a wasted nation in need of salvation by a generation of future Queens:

Far among the moorlands and the rocks—far in the
darkness of the terrible streets—these feeble florets are
lying, with all their fresh leaves torn, and their stems
broken: will you never go down to them, nor set them in
order in their little fragrant beds, nor fence them in their
trembling, from the fierce wind? (131)

It is significant that Sara’s desire to help unfortunate girls manifests as “giving buns and bread to the populace” (*Little Princess* 247), the very language which Ruskin uses in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” outlining the duty of the Good Queen to be charitable. Charity is an intrinsic part of both a homemaker and a (figurative) royal, according to

Ruskin, who declares that “lady means ‘bread-giver’ or ‘loaf-giver,’” a title which has “reference not to the law which is maintained in the house, nor to the bread which is given to the household; but to the law maintained for the multitude and to bread broken among the multitude” (Ruskin 257). Of course, if her duty reflects the Good Queen, then the gift which Sara is duty-bound to share with her “fallen” sisters is the Wicked Queen’s imagination.

As noted before, there is a change in diction between Sara’s fantasies at the beginning of *A Little Princess* and her fantasies toward the end, the movement from “pretending” to “supposing.” She tells Lavinia, “if you suppose anything hard enough, it seems as if it were real” (72) and later, her “supposing” brings about some very real results, such as her wish that she should find a “sixpence which belonged to nobody,” a passage in which she repeats the word “suppose” five times (156). In other scenes, when Sara “supposes” something she does so with an air of intentionality, as when she tells Melchisedec, “suppose I make friends with you,” and then promptly goes on to do so (112). “Supposing” differs from “pretending,” with “pretends” reconsidering the world as it currently is, while “supposes” project a possible future, setting goals and creating plans to act upon, which becomes clear in the novel’s final chapter.

Sara and Mr. Carrisford sit together in their comfortable home in the last pages of the novel, and, seeing that Sara is lost in reverie once again, Mr. Carrisford asks what she is “supposing.” Sara explains, “I was supposing a kind of plan ... I was thinking I should like to do something” (245). Twice the characters use the word “suppose” to denote the extent of Sara’s activeness and control in her daydreaming; where Sara once “pretended away” her loneliness and poverty through sheer fancy, now she “supposes a plan” which

she will enact in reality. When Sara mentions her “plan,” Mr. Carrisford eagerly informs her, “You may do anything you like do to, princess” (247)—again, affirming the once-powerless Sara’s limitless power. What Sara “supposes” to do, of course, is to help destitute girls like herself and “give buns and bread to the populace” (247), remedying the destruction she witnessed among the “London savages.” Just as Sara heals the “weak and broken” Mr. Carrisford after his failure as a colonizer (231), she plans to heal the weakness and brokenness in an England decaying under its doomed imperial project, reminiscent of Ruskin’s “darkness of the terrible streets” (Ruskin 131).⁸

Sure enough, when Sara meets the beggar-girl she once fed in the street, it is to find she has been revived, “no longer a savage” with “the wild look gone from her eyes,” “clean and neatly clothed” (249). More importantly, she had inherited Sara’s compassion,

⁸ Scholars of *A Little Princess* in the context of imperialism may argue that Burnett’s relocation of the empire to Britain from the overseas colonies in fact feeds into the imperialist project; McGillis perceives Sara’s story as a feminine counterpart to male narratives of colonial expansion like *Robinson Crusoe*; in his reading *A Little Princess* “accepts the imperial myths while it also promotes the woman’s cause” (12), celebrating the woman’s side of the imperial paradigm in which “men went on explorations while women kept the home fires burning” (10). Similarly, Kutzer discusses the “empire at home” in *A Little Princess* (47), claiming that in girls’ fiction, characters promote the empire by tending to the domestic sphere, whereas in boys’ fiction they do so by adventuring abroad. Kutzer states that *A Little Princess* falls right into this mold, with Sara’s journey throughout the novel being her search for “the ideal domestic empire” (49), in comparison to her father’s ideal colonial empire. With these readings in mind, it is hardly remarkable that the novel champions the women who govern and rejuvenate Britain; tending the domestic empire is their duty while the men are abroad. To take this reading to its logical conclusion, women ruling and preserving England is merely an extension of their “angel in the home” title; England itself becomes an extension of the domestic, the house, the woman’s domain, while the imperial colonies become the “society of the outer world” which men navigate exclusively. However, this reading overlooks many of the themes of ruin and destruction which Burnett attaches to her colonial subplot in *A Little Princess*. McGillis concedes that Burnett’s “engagement with the imperial theme” is “complex,” insofar as she depicts the colonies having a “weakening effect” on “growing” children like Sara and *The Secret Garden*’s Mary (14), and emphasizes Britain as the more suitable location for them: “the health of the nation depends on the proper cultivation at home, and adventures in the colonies can only result in weakness” (14). However, he, and Kutzer, do not note that as troublesome as the “weakening effect” of the colonies on little girls might be, its effect on the actual colonizers is far worse, as both Mary’s parents and Sara’s father are killed, and Mr. Carrisford is nearly ruined psychologically and physically by “adventures in the colonies.” In *A Little Princess* we see imperialists like Captain Crewe and Mr. Carrisford fail and perish. The novel does not endorse girls like Sara reigning domestically while the men adventure abroad, rather, it sees colonialism collapse, die and deflate, and survivors like Mr. Carrisford only healing when they return to London where they belong. England is less an extension of the private, domestic sphere where women belong than the true heart of British society to which all its fragmented subjects steadily return; for girls like Sara to hold power over this “heart,” then, is true authority.

such that Sara charges her to go through the same motions she once did, giving “buns and bread to the children” out of sympathy acquired through knowing “what it is to be hungry” (250). Sara sets a cycle in motion here: Sara “supposed” her responsibility to help the beggar-girl, and now the beggar-girl will go forth to help other “children” who may do the same, gradually restoring a princess-like sense of kindness and nobility to a nation reduced to savagery. Princesses, bound by a duty to help others, are Burnett’s solution to the problem of the dying empire; what has been lost in England can be restored through the fruitful imaginations and noble actions of girls like Sara.

In conclusion, *A Little Princess* rebuilds the Victorian narrative of the madwoman and transforms it from a story of dark despair to one of hope, much as Sara herself rebuilds her attic in her imagination. Sara’s exile plays out much like the madwoman narrative which Gilbert and Gubar identify, with Sara’s creative energy confounded by the presence of an all-authoring father until, confined in the attic, she allows it to break loose. Yet where a Brontë or a Gilman might characterize her madwoman as destructive and caged, Burnett writes Sara using her wild “pretends” to transform her attic into a safe space for dreaming and creation, tempering the Wicked Queen’s madness with the Good Queen’s reason. The “princess” of the novel’s title refers to this synthesis of Good Queen and Wicked Queen, a figure which neither tries to repress the Wicked Queen’s creative energy nor abandons the Good Queen’s sense of compassion and duty. Sara is likened many times to a princess throughout the novel, and each time Burnett pictures the “princess” as a being with dual natures, at once abject and glorious. Where a queen is “pampered” (82), a princess is “in rags and tatters” (138), “poor and driven from [her] throne” (158) and yet can “do anything,” as Sara once muses, “anything I like” (141).

The princess-figure which Sara makes her model the most frequently is Marie Antoinette, whose contradictory nature fascinates her; stripped of the signifiers of her nobility, the deposed Antoinette is nonetheless noble, her wretched and withered appearance making her seem “more like a queen than when she was so gay and everything was so grand” (138). Sara imagines her as beautiful in spite of her outward powerlessness—she finishes one reverie on the queen by thinking that “those howling mobs of people did not frighten” Antoinette, that “she was stronger than they were, even when they cut her head off” (138). Her parting image of the beheaded Antoinette is a blur of contradiction, at once defeated and triumphant, dead and alive. The figure of the princess, then, is one that essentially occupies in-between spaces and embodies paradoxes.

Likewise, Sara experiences her princesshood through negation; she is “the little un-fairy princess” because “though she is not exactly a fairy, she will be so rich when she is found that she will be like a princess in a fairy tale” (221). A princess’ ambiguity, her “not-exactliness,” stems in part from her young age and the fact that much of her power lies in her potential; she is not yet grown into a queen, good or evil, and hence contains the possibility of becoming either. Just as Sara *will be* so rich and *will be* like a princess in a fairy tale, the princess’ queenly power—the polarized “Good” or “Wicked” power—exists chiefly in the future. Until she comes into this queenly power, the princess is a “not-exactly” who can fulfill the roles of both Wicked Queen and Good Queen at once. Where both the Wicked Queen and Good Queen’s power is limited by their fragmentation, their inability to access power outside the narrow list of attributes allowed them by their confining stereotypes, the Princess who combines both of their natures is

whole and complete, and incredibly powerful. In this way the state of princess-like “not-exactliness” enables Sara to heal the broken people and spaces around her. Princesses, Burnett argues, are what Britain needs—young, creative, duty-bound women who can transform their own repression and disenfranchisement into a vehicle for positive change. *A Little Princess* dramatizes the need of Britain, during the twilight of the empire, for girls like Sara who can “suppose” a better future.

The healing mission of *A Little Princess*, then, is twofold: it promises salvation for the fragmented cityscape of 1905 London and for woman readers of any time and location. Perry Nodelman writes in *The Hidden Adult* that behind the simple and straightforward texts written for children there, often lies a “shadow text,” a reading which belies an experienced, knowing voice hiding underneath the innocent and childlike character of the narrative. This shadow text is the implied motherly moralizer behind *The Purple Jar* or the narrator of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, who both “know more” than their child protagonists and thereby both highlight the innocence of the child characters and subtly declare it as folly (22). The shadow text is the voice of the adult reader—the “adult editors, publishers, reviewers, librarians, and parents who produce, market, distribute, recommend, select and purchase children’s books” (207). Children’s books speak to a dual audience of children and the adults in the shadows, the emerging adult within the child and the memory of childhood within the adult. Similarly Zohar Shavit makes the statement in *The Poetics of Children’s Literature* that children’s literature is essentially “polysystemic,” operating across several different strata of the literary canon, “read differently (though concurrently) by at least two groups of readers”

(Shavit 66). The ability of children's literature to belong "simultaneously to more than one system" (Shavit 66) is crucial to the program of a book like *A Little Princess*.

Burnett's novel stages a conversation between its joint simple text and shadow text. The simplest texts for children "resonate," implying a complex shadow text that derives its meaning from the place of experience the adult reader occupies, a "context of the repertoire of previously existing knowledge about life and literature" (Nodelman 77). Likewise, the story of Sara Crewe is essentially a simple, even naïve fairy tale, marked as such by its use of the "princess" and "magic" motifs; however, it resonates with symbols found in contemporary literature for adult women, the madwoman narrative. Rather than leaving these adult-recognizable symbols in the shadows, however, the main "simple" text of *A Little Princess* confronts them and brings them to light. It borrows narratives and images from the realm of adults' literature and restages them in its own childlike terms, first setting up Sara as a child-sized "madwoman in the attic," a girl with an imagination repressed by the men around her. Instead of leading her to despair and exile, however, Sara's imagination becomes a source of power and security. Motifs that signal the cold and harsh realism of the adult women's novel, like the dark, maddening attic, are transformed into benign and familiar shapes from children's fairy-stories. The madness becomes magic. The victimized woman becomes the heroine. In Nodelman's vision, the adult "shadow" behind the children's text exposes child readers to adult ways of thinking, particularly adult ways of conceptualizing childhood, moving "beyond childhood in order to confirm the value of childhood" (Nodelman 225). In doing so the adult reader supposedly educates the child reader and (most importantly, in Nodelman's view) protects her "from knowledge" and "experience" (Nodelman 158). In contrast, the

childlike narrative of *A Little Princess* offers to rescue its adult readers. If the “madwoman” of Victorian literature can transform her fragmentation and madness into real magic in the context of childhood, then the adult woman reader living in the shadows might do likewise. By participating in the act of reading a children’s book like *A Little Princess*, the woman reader can access her recollections of girlhood, a moment before she was a Good or Wicked Queen but a Princess, like Sara, who could do whatever she liked. Experiencing literature simultaneously as a child and as an adult, the reader, like Nodelman’s child reader who gains an adult-like perspective of childhood and is thereby “educated,” can become stronger and more whole.

A Little Princess represents a clinamen in the tradition of nineteenth-century women’s literature, a movement, occurring across many Victorian girls’ novels, away from depictions of women as either caged or transcendent but always incomplete. The heroine of the Victorian girls’ novel, exemplified by Sara Crewe, can create without using her power for chaos and disorder, and can nurture without abnegating her self; she synthesizes the qualities of Good and Wicked Queens. Enabled to do “whatever she likes,” a Princess like Sara can act in deliberate, responsible, informed ways to help herself and others. The girlhood pictured in books like *A Little Princess*, which does not require us to “kill” either monster or angel but unite them to create something new, provides a positive alternative to the polarized and fragmented conceptions of womanhood which have come to define Victorian women’s literature. Recognizing *A Little Princess* and its many sisters as contributions to the canon of nineteenth-century novels allows for a more nuanced, more hopeful and healthful understanding of Victorian women’s literature as a whole.

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