Mastery at Misselthwaite Manor: 
Taming the Shrews in The Secret Garden

Frances E. Dolan

According to one of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s biographers, “the most original thing about” her 1911 novel, The Secret Garden, “was that its heroine and one of its heroes were both thoroughly unattractive children” (Thwaite 221). Many critics agree. Since the reader does not meet the “thoroughly unattractive” Colin until the book’s thirteenth chapter, the novel’s emphasis in its first movement falls on the ways in which Mary Lennox fails to please adults and thereby wins over many a young reader. Mary, then, is not like the winning protagonists of Burnett’s earlier hits, Little Lord Fauntleroy and A Little Princess, or of other roughly contemporary children’s books, such as Pollyanna and Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm. Perhaps as a consequence, her popularity has grown as theirs has declined.

Many fans of The Secret Garden have felt a sense of loss as Mary’s character dwindles and Colin’s achieves ascendancy—thanks to her efforts. Critics who attend to the book’s analogs have labor to contextualize and thus explain and ameliorate its narrative arc, connecting the novel to sources as surprising, at first glance, as Virgil’s Georgics, as well as to those to which the text itself announces its debts, including Burnett’s other books, earlier sentimental fiction for and about children, fairy tales, and especially Jane Eyre. Like Jane, Mary secures many readers’ identification and attachment through the very qualities that supposedly make her “unattractive”: her ire, her isolation and independence, her insubordination, and her self-possession.

In this essay, I will argue that these very characteristics link Mary to the “shrew,” the disorderly character dating back at least as far as Socrates’s wife Xantippe, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath, and Noah’s wife in medieval drama. The shrew is a stock character in medieval as well as early modern popular culture, and she persists as a recognizable type into the present. In the sixteenth century, the identifying features of the shrew became codified (see Boose; Bradbrook; Brown; Dolan; Wayne; and Woodbridge). These features include defiant self-assertion; insubordination; a questing, intrusive curiosity; an irritable sense of grievance and inclination to quarrel; and physical violence. While violence is sometimes used or threatened as part of the process of taming the shrew, the character herself usually initiates it. For example, Katharina hits at least four people in the course of Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew. Some shrews speak a lot or loudly, but others express their resistance through silence. Shakespeare’s Katharina is notably silent at key moments; for example, she never actually consents to marry Petruchio.

Just as Mary resembles the stereotypical shrew, the novel’s plot is indebted to the venerable shrew-taming tradition. From Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew to George Cukor’s The Philadelphia Story, the shrew-taming plot depicts how a feisty woman, isolated in part by her refusal to conform, is domesticated in order to accommodate herself to social relationships, especially marriage. Taming is the condition on which we’re offered the story of the fascinating and satisfying shrew. But when the shrew is tamed, she surrenders some or all of the feistiness that defined her and created the plot’s action. For many readers and viewers, especially if they identify with the so-called shrew, this process feels more loss than gain.

In The Secret Garden, being tamed is a largely benevolent process of learning to be “friends with” persons and things (109, 144). It produces positive results—measured in weight gained, improved health, better manners, and brighter spirits. Just as Mary is a shrew who is tamed in the course of the story, she in turn tames Colin, largely by matching his shrewishness, as many shrew tamers traditionally do. Mary’s arrival at Misselthwaite, as Mrs. Sowerby sums up, has been “‘th’ makin’ o’ her an’ th’ savin’” of Colin (144). But Mary’s success in saving Colin also achieves her own subordination, because she helps him step up to the role of lead protagonist, a role that, in shrew-taming stories and in The Secret Garden, cannot be shared. As one early reviewer of The Secret Garden complained: “it is so hard to decide who is the leading character and whose story it is” (Whay 269). By dividing her attention between two protagonists, Burnett links her story to the shrew-taming plot, which, like the twentieth-century battle of the sexes comedies that evolve from it, always divides its attention between two protagonists—until the ending. Assuming that there can be only one master in a household, only one lead or star in the narrative, these stories end decisively with one person, the tamer on top. Discussing the ability of good thoughts to drive out bad ones, and roses to supplant weeds, the narrator of The Secret Garden offers a pithy summation of the logic behind such plots: “Two things cannot be in one place” (163).

Burnett, however, manages to have it both ways in The Secret Garden, offering us equally “unattractive” and badly behaved protagonists while
instructing us on the benefits of fresh air, exercise, good manners, and positive thinking. But, as is usually true in the shrew-taming plot, the two imperatives don’t coexist for long. Didacticism soon banishes the deliciously bad conduct; reformation carries the day; and Colin seizes the spotlight. In arguing that *The Secret Garden* is indebted to the shrew-taming tradition, an influence Burnett does not seem to control or critique—and which many readers suffer but do not quite understand—I address why so many readers who remember *The Secret Garden* fondly also forget its conclusion in order to reverse or refuse the operations of its plot.⁴

Influential arguments about children’s literature draw our attention to the ways in which children interact with the stories presented to them. Many children’s stories are obviously didactic, even if lessons have changed over time and from author to author, largely because children’s literature so often includes a “hidden” adult perspective on childhood (see Nodelman; Rose). Other books, it has been argued, are subversive, slyly challenging the assumptions and values of adult society (Lurie). In either case, child readers might interpret the stories offered in unpredictable ways, making subversion of didacticism and vice versa. And there are further options; child readers might engage the stories they read in ways that supplement, extend, or contravert them, sometimes revealing the deadly serious stakes of play (Bernstein). In this essay, I am interested in how the plot of a children’s novel can draw on a well-worn convention—even if neither its author nor its readers explicitly recognize its provenance—and thereby school readers in a set of narrative expectations that are simultaneously social expectations.

Many of the novel’s first critics agreed that the reader could immediately intuit that Mary and Colin would be reformed and that this reformation would structure the plot. A review in *Outlook* in 1911, for instance, proclaims that when we meet this very disagreeable boy and girl “we know that she [meaning Burnett] will remodel them before our eyes, as it were, into lovable little human beings” (“New Books” 267). The expectation that these cousins will change for the better comes in part from a long didactic tradition in children’s literature, preceding this novel and extending long after it, in which growing up means gain.⁵ The expectation that the disagreeable will be rendered agreeable also has far deeper roots.

Although, as many critics have noted, “new thought” provides the plot of the novel, in which Mary and Colin learn to banish their bad thoughts and thus heal themselves, *The Secret Garden*, in its interest in taming and being tamed, is as much an “old thought” story as it is a “new thought” one.⁶ Borrowing from the English nursery rhyme with which other children taunt Mary, “Mistress Mary, quite contrary, / How does your garden grow?” Burnett favored the word “contrary” to describe the precise way in which Mary is unappealing. Burnett’s working title for the novel was *Mistress Mary*, considerably less evocative than *The Secret Garden*, but leaving the reader to supply the “quite contrary” (Rector 189). The word “contrary,” with its emphasis on opposition, antagonism, and difference (see *OED*), pits its bearer against the world, since “contrary” only has meaning in relation to that against which it runs athwart. In her contrariness, Mary resembles the shrew.

As one sixteenth-century story about a shrew explains, she was a woman “so contrary unto her husband in all things, that whatsoever she had said, how absurd soever it were, she would maintaine it even to death” (Heywood *Hór*). What defines the shrew above all is her oppositional stance. She understands herself as in conflict with or contrary to others; she is unable to submit herself to authority and strenuously resists attempts to subordinate her.

In *The Secret Garden*, Ben Weatherstaff tells Colin and Mary a story about a woman whose husband beats her for calling him a drunken brute. While he presents the anecdote as part of his effort to understand the magic of positive thinking, it also introduces the essentials of the classic shrew-taming story: a woman’s anger and self-assertion, and a man’s violent retaliation. Colin interprets the story as meaning that the woman used the wrong magic “and made him [her husband] beat her. If she’d used the right Magic and had said something nice perhaps he wouldn’t have got as drunk as a lord and perhaps—he might have bought her a new bonnet” (139–40). Just as “new thought” grants one the ability to repel ill health and bad luck, it also confers responsibility for negative consequences. In Colin’s view, the woman “made” her husband drink and beat her. Ben laughingly says he’ll advise the wife to try the more positive magic—to tame her husband, in other words, rather than defying him and provoking his violence. As Price points out, the message for the future wife is clear: “Say the wrong thing and be beaten. Say the right thing and get a bonnet” (10). “Say as he says or we shall never go,” as Hortensio advises Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew* (4.5.11). Acquiescing at last to Petruchio’s taming efforts, Katharina assures him that his will determines whether she calls the sun the moon or vice versa: “What you will have it named, even that it is, / And so it shall be so for Katharine” (4.5.21–22). The process by
which Katharina learns to say the “right thing” is variously interpreted as complete capitulation and as a new tactic for managing Petruchio. For her, as for the woman in Ben’s story, one incentive to submit is the promise of a new bonnet. Introducing a shrew-taming story into *The Secret Garden*, Ben reminds us of the violence implicit in such stories, the struggle for power at their center, and their association with marriage.

As a noun, the word “shrew” first referred to a “small insectivorous animal.” It then acquired the meaning of a “wicked, evil-disposed or malignant man,” or even the devil. Only in the fourteenth century does it appear to have become associated with women, especially wives, prone to “pervers or malignant behaviour” (*OED*). The term “shrew” thus identifies its object as a pest, as not quite human, and as in need of domestication. A seventeenth-century bestiary shows how assumptions about human “shrews” could be read back into a description of the animal itself: a shrew is “a ravening beast, feygyn gyt selce to be gentle and tame, but being touched it bithe depe, and poisoneth deadly. It beareth a cruell minde, desyring to hurt anything, neither is there any creature that it loveth, or it loveth him, because it is feared of al” (Topsell 536). This emphasis on being unlovable and unloving is the most important connection between both Mary and Colin—in their untamed states—and the so-called shrew. Although the word “shrew” does not appear in *The Secret Garden*, we do find the similar term “vixen”: a she-fox, but more broadly, “an ill-tempered, quarrelsome woman; a shrew; a termagant” (*OED*). Martha’s mother calls her a “young vixen” in a scene Martha recounts to and restages with Mary. Colin’s nurse says that if he had had “a young vixen of a sister to fight with it would have been the saving of him” (100), implying that Mary is now filling the vixen role.

Although Mary is never called a “shrew” in the novel, she and Colin are both associated with animals. Mary shares the empty bungalow in India with a little snake, both of them unnoticed and unvalued (6); she has always wanted but not had a pet (20); the robin is one of her first friends; and she finds the mice nesting in the India room with its collection of ivory elephants. She parallels the half-drowned orphan fox cub whom Dickon rescues (32); she is the missel thrush (66, 72); and, like Colin, she is a motherless lamb (115). In turn, Colin calls himself a “boy animal” (90, 138); in confronting Colin, Mary “walked straight into a lion’s den,” according to Martha (81). Both children’s association with animals marks them as not-quite-domesticated, as untamed.

In its language of animal and child “charming,” *The Secret Garden* avoids the violence that sometimes characterizes shrew taming. In the mid-sixteenth century ballad “A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife Lapped in Morel’s Skin,” a husband beats his shrewish wife, salts her wounds, and wraps her in an uncurled horsehide. In Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio’s methods are less overtly violent than those depicted in “A Merry Jest” and other popular accounts. But as one critic points out, “it does not speak well of a hero that the best thing to be said in his favor is that he neither beats his wife nor wraps her in a salted horsehide” (Woodbridge 207). To tame Katharina, Petruchio must not only match her rage and defiance but exceed them. In doing so, he risks becoming something of a shrew himself in that he creates mayhem in ways that mirror Katharina’s untamed conduct. He arrives late for their wedding, dressed in outrageous disarray. During the ceremony, he cuffs the priest, throws wincesops in the sexton’s face, and publicly kisses Katharina with a loud smack. He drags her away from the wedding feast, somehow manages to get her “bemoiled” in the mud on their way home, and then creates mess after mess upon their arrival at his house. There Petruchio terrorizes his servants in front of his wife (or at least pretends to), keeps her from sleeping, starves her, thwarts her desire for new clothes, and defies her sense of reality, insisting that she confirm his own assertions no matter how nonsensical. To confuse her further, he insists “that all is done in reverent care of her” (4.1.173). Just as wrapping a wife in a salted horsehide seems like a disorderly way to impose order, so Petruchio’s methods exaggerate the disorder he seeks to cure. As his servant Curtis remarks at the start of Petruchio’s “reign” as a shrew-tamer, “he is more shrew than she” (4.1.61).

Later adaptations of Shakespeare’s play emphasized the contest between the two “shrews” over who gains the upper hand. When the eighteenth-century actor-manager David Garrick adapted the play as *Catharine and Petruchio* (1756), the version most often performed throughout the late eighteenth century, he assigned his Catharine her own agenda: “I’ll marry my revenge, but I will tame him.” In Garrick’s version, Catharine has a soliloquy at the end of act one:

> Look to your seat, Petruchio, or I throw you.
> 
> *Catharine* shall tame this haggard [wild hawk];—or if she fails,
> 
> Shall tye her tongue up, and pare down her Nails. (Garrick 16–17)

In turn, at the end of the play Garrick’s Petruchio depicts his blistering as a pose he can now abandon, having achieved his goal: “Petruchio
here shall doff the lordly Husband: / An honest Mask, which I throw off with Pleasure. / Far hence all Rudeness, Willfulness, and Noise” (Garrick 34–35). The 1929 film directed by Sam Taylor, starring real-life wife and husband Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, gave Katharina the lines from Garrick’s adaptation. The film also incorporated and built upon the eighteenth-century stage tradition of Petruchio carrying a bull whip, by having Pickford crack one of her own. Petruchio and Katharina thus achieve a curious kind of equality as they face off, whip to whip.

The uncertainty about who is the shrew—that is, the greatest threat to domestic order—usually occupies the center of the shrew-taming plot. This question is resolved by the taming process, through which the tamer succeeds—and then is able to retreat from his most extreme actions—and the shrew is tamed and so conforms to expectations for orderly conduct. Each earns approbation for restoring the expected gender hierarchy and turning chaos into order. In Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew, for example, Katharina achieves center stage and the longest speech in the play as she performs her submission to her husband (Kahn 116); Petruchio lords it over the other husbands as top dog, wins the wager over whose wife is most obedient, and collects a double dowry from Katharina’s father.

In The Secret Garden, too, at the center of the plot there is some uncertainty as to which of the children is less agreeable—Mary or Colin. As in the shrew-taming tradition, that uncertainty makes them a perfect match, with Mary playing the double role of tamer as well as shrew. Although Burnett’s version of “new thought” emphasizes self-regulation and self-reform, without Mary’s help Colin cannot redirect his will from invaliding himself and terrorizing the staff to focusing on self-healing, as Lerner, Keyser, and other critics also suggest. Only someone as imperious and entitled as Mary can stand up to Colin. As Price puts it, Mary “must remain a bad girl long enough to tame the bad boy” (10).

The plot proceeds in two movements. First, “Circumstances … were very kind to [Mary], though she was not at all aware of it. They began to push her about for her own good” (163). Then, Mary pushes Colin about for his own good. In the plot’s intertwined taming processes, Mary is tamed through her interactions with Martha, Dickon, Mrs. Sowerby, and Ben Weatherstaff; in turn, she tames Colin. But as we will see, the novel’s “infamous ending” (Horne and Sanders xxxii, xxxiii) assigns the rewards for both taming and being tamed to Colin rather than to Mary.

Mastery at Misselthwaite Manor

The shrew-taming tradition often depicts the shrew and her tamer in the larger context of a household including servants, in order to emphasize that husband and wife stand together at the top of a domestic hierarchy; part of being a good master or mistress is fulfilling obligations to servants. In “Merry Jest,” the husband finally determines to tame his wife, whatever it takes, after one of the servants complains that she curses and threatens them and begrudges them their meals, rather than serving them as a good mistress should. “We cannot always have our will,” he instructs her, “Though that we were a king’s peer” (663–64). To abuse one’s authority is to lose it and to squander the loyalty of one’s servants. In The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio’s servant Grumio is both the object of Katharina’s shrewishness and part of Petruchio’s taming team, domesticating her by thwarting her demands and denying her food.

Similarly, if more subtly, the first movement of The Secret Garden uses servants to display Mary’s shrewishness and then to help tame her. Mary undergoes a sequence of discoveries in relation to servants and social subordinates. In India, Mary’s mistreatment of servants is in part a consequence of her mother’s insistence that no one provoke Mary into reminding her mother of her existence: “they always obeyed her and gave her her own way in everything, because the Mem Sahib would be angry if she was disturbed by her crying” (3). When we first meet Mary, she is beating and kicking the female servant who comes to check on her (2; see Lurie 141). As the narrator explains of Mary’s first encounter with Martha,

The native servants she had been used to in India were not in the least like this. They were obsequious and servile and did not presume to talk to their masters as if they were their equals. They made salaams and called them “protector of the poor” and names of that sort. Indian servants were commanded to do things, not asked. It was not the custom to say “please” and “thank you” and Mary had always slapped her Ayah in the face when she was angry. She wondered a little what this girl would do if one slapped her in the face. (16)

Mary’s first attempt to assert control is usually violent. What stops her with Martha is that Martha is bigger than she is and she suddenly feels her own youth and small size—maybe Martha would hit back if her antagonist were “only a little girl” (16).
While Mrs. Medlock confirms Mary in her contrariness (15), Martha quickly begins to change her. Martha might hit her back; Martha reminds her that she works for Mrs. Medlock, not for Mary; Martha shames her for being unable and unwilling to dress herself (16–19); Martha challenges her with the question, “How does tha’ like thysel?” (38). Martha also brokers Dickon’s purchase of gardening tools and seeds for Mary and brings her Mrs. Sowerby’s gift of the skipping rope, a turning point because it invites Mary’s gratitude: “she was not used to thanking people or noticing that they did things for her” (44). When the narrator lists the “good things” happening to Mary, these don’t include being crossed (50). But it’s clear that recognizing her disagreeableness and being “pushed”—by the wind and by both Martha and Ben—are crucial to her taming process.

Martha’s skill as a tamer emerges in part because she is unschooled in hierarchy and so doesn’t see Mary as her better: “If Martha had been a well-trained fine young lady’s maid she would have been more subservient and respectful” (19). But what distinguishes her from a “well-trained lady’s maid” marks her as a teacher, and Mary suspects “that her life at Misselthwaite Manor would end by teaching her a number of things quite new to her” (19)—such as dressing herself and not beating servants. Just as Shakespeare’s Kathrina beats her tutor and disrupts her lessons, “Mary had been taught very little because her governesses had disliked her too much to stay with her” (51). Before she can learn a more conventional curriculum, she has to attend what might be called a taming school. Mrs. Sowerby and Mary both think that Archibald Craven should postpone hiring a governess; what Mary needs to learn precedes what a governess can teach her.

The narrator describes Mary’s early conflicts with Colin as between equal combatants who wield words rather than blows. But the prospect of violence lurks in the background. Mary imagines that “somebody” should use violence to control Colin. His screams make her both terrified and angry: “she felt as if she would like to fly into a tantrum herself and frighten him as he was frightening her. She was not used to any one’s tempers but her own.” She stamps her foot and cries out, “He ought to be stopped! Somebody ought to make him stop! Somebody ought to beat him!” (102). In the servants’ hall, “the butler, who was a man with a family, had more than once expressed his opinion that the invalid would be all the better ‘for a good hiding’” (116). In a disturbing attack on Mary, Ben shakes his fist at her, calls her a “young b’uch,” and threatens that if he weren’t a “bachelh’er” and Mary were his daughter, he’d “give thee a hidin’!” (128). For the butler and Ben, beating is a father’s prerogative and a prescription for bad behavior. It is invoked in the novel as an alternative to gentler forms of taming, and as a response to Colin invites. When Mary instructs Colin that he is rude, she says of Dr. Craven that “if you had been his own boy and he had been a slapping sort of man . . . he would have slapped you” (136). These references to beating as a way of “owning” one’s children hint at a more violent shrew taming—or childrearing—story haunting this one. Twice imagining that Colin deserves a beating, Mary is both the shrew, violently expressing her contrariness, and the whip-wielding shrew tamer in little.

At the center of the plot, then, Mary occupies both positions, undertaking the job of taming Colin when only partially tamed herself. She is already feeling friendly toward the garden, and can count the robin, Dickon, Martha, Mrs. Sowerby, and Ben among her friends. She is thus capable of feeling some interest in and compassion for another. But she is also depicted as the perfect match for Colin because she is as willful and uncontrolled as he. Like Mary, Colin has been made monstrous by being unopposed: “Everyone is obliged to do what pleases me,” he tells her (76). The “big doctor’s” diagnosis is that his ailments are largely a result of “too much lettin’ him have his own way” (82). According to Mrs. Medlock, “we’ve had to let him trample all over every one of us ever since he had feet and he thinks that’s what folk was born for” (121). If a shrew is both contrary and unable to bear being crossed, then the best treatment is opposition, as Martha first teaches Mary. Only Mary is able and willing to be contrary to Colin; in taming him, her contrariness finds a purpose.9 “A nice sympathetic child could neither have thought nor said such things, but it just happened that the shock of hearing them was the best possible thing for this hysterical boy whom no one had ever dared to restrain or contradict” (103). Her temper enables her to do “what none of us dare do,” as Mrs. Medlock puts it (111); “Mary was not as afraid of him as other people were and she was not a self-sacrificing person” (97). While everyone else ignores or attempts to appease Colin, Mary responds to him, acknowledging and mirroring his conduct, as Petruchio does Katharina.

When Mary confronts Colin, the nurse says to her. “It’s the best thing that could happen to the sickly pampered thing to have some one stand up to him that’s as spoiled as himself” (100). When Mary intervenes in Colin’s tantrum, the nurse says, “You’re in the right humor. You go and scold him. Give him something new to think of” (102). Licensing
Mary to scold, the nurse urges her to harness her disorderliness in the interests of household peace. At the center of the plot, then, the servants egg Mary on as the shrew who can tame another shrew.

Mary and the servants all recognize this dynamic as comical: “It was not until afterward that Mary realized that the thing had been funny as well as dreadful—that it was funny that all the grown-up people were so frightened that they came to a little girl just because they guessed she was almost as bad as Colin himself” (102). Below stairs at Misselthwaite, “There was a great deal of joking about the unpopular young recluse, who, as the cook said, ‘had found his master and good for him’” (116). Despite or because of their violence, shrew-taming stories are often presented as humorous. The humor arises from a process that is chaotic and even slapstick, and from its reassuring outcome, by which what is understood as disordered or contrary is restored to order: the uppity shrew is put down. In The Secret Garden, the narrator concurs with the cook’s assessment that it is good for Colin to meet his master: “The truth was that he had never had a fight with anyone like himself in his life and, upon the whole, it was rather good for him, though neither he nor Mary knew anything about that” (99). The bracing nature of this contest comes from the fact that it is between near equals. That is also what makes it, within the logic of the shrew-taming plot, unsustainable. By standing up to Colin, Mary helps him to become the master rather than her peer. Since taming prepares its object to play an assigned social role more successfully, Colin’s taming offers him different rewards from those Mary’s taming offers to her.

Although Mary and Colin are cousins and allies, the vestige of a shrew-taming plot, in which the two are competing for narrative centrality, shapes their opposed plot trajectories, enlarging him and diminishing her. The plot works to empower Colin—investing him with the privileges of masculinity, mastery, and even of being a “Rajah”—while it works to subordinate Mary, stripping her of the tyrannical power she held in India, and feminizing her into a “blush rose.” Even as the novel’s social subordinates serve the interests of the two young people, they also advance this plot, which ultimately privileges Colin over Mary.

Mary, to whom nothing belongs and who belongs to no one, enters into a contest with Colin for possession of the garden, “her secret kingdom” (49), a contest that, in many ways, he wins. “Nothing belongs to me,” she confides to Dickon (60), as the thought of losing the garden pushes her back into contrariness: “She knew she felt contrary again, and obstinate, and she did not care at all” (60). Even in India, Mary

had turned to gardening as a form of self-soothing, pretending to make flower beds (4, 7, 70); the one thing she requests from her uncle is a “bit of earth” (70); and she reserves her greatest affection for the garden, bestowing her only kiss on her crocuses (92). If the garden is the only thing that she takes as belonging to her, her friendship with Colin immediately imperils her possession of it. As soon as she tells Colin about the garden in an effort to distract and console him, he assumes possession of it. He leaps at the idea of a secret garden because “He was too much like herself” (76). “He thought that the whole world belonged to him” (77), a form that Mary’s shrewishness does not take. Mary has to manage his possessiveness by convincing him to protect his new kingdom’s status as secret: “if you make them open the door and take you in . . . it will never be secret again” (77).

For all Colin’s privilege and possessiveness, Mary controls the resources and events at the heart of the plot. Just as Petruchio’s “political reign” for taming depends on his control over his wife’s access to food, sleep, clothing, and social respectability, so Mary holds the key to the one place that captures Colin’s imagination, the secret garden. She stirs up his desire to see the garden, then judiciously doles out information about it, and finally controls not only his access to it but his appreciation of it. In chapter twenty, when Mary and Dickon finally bring Colin to the garden, Mary depends on deixis to direct the reader’s attention and Colin’s gaze, to recapitulate her own process of discovery, and to control the suspenseful process of opening the garden to him: “This is it . . . this is where”; “that is”; “this is”; “And that is where”; “And this is where.” The scene builds toward the exciting moment when Mary pulls back the curtain of ivy to reveal the gate to her secret garden: “And here is the handle, and here is the door. Dickon push him in—push him in quickly!” (123). As her command to Dickon reminds us, Mary is the narrator, stage manager, and director here (Lerer 247). While Colin is, as usual, lordly—sitting in state under a “king’s canopy” as Mary and Dickon show him things—they are as well, when they push his chair, “it was like being taken in state round the country of a magic king and queen” (125). But at this apex of rhetorical and material control, Mary is also at the start of her decline from narrative centrality.

Although Mrs. Medlock predicts that Mary will teach Colin “that the whole orange does not belong to him, as Susan Sowerby says. And he’ll be likely to find out the size of his own quarter” (121), Mary in fact helps Colin understand that his quarter is bigger than he’d realized—the whole estate rather than his room. As soon as he enters the
garden he announces, "It is my garden now" (133). Ultimately, he assumes possession of the manor, which his cousin the Doctor now will not inherit (77, 112) and which the children wander freely, including the garden Mary cherishes as her own secret.

As the story progresses, Colin becomes less tyrannical but more masterful. "I'm your master," he reminds Ben Weatherstaff, "when my father is away. And you are to obey me. This is my garden. Don't dare to say a word about it!" (131). This authoritative pronouncement moves the supposedly crusty Ben to tears of joy. At another moment, the narrator assures us that Ben is "secretly . . . immensely pleased" when Colin reprimands him: "He really did not mind being snubbed since the snubbing meant that the lad was gaining strength and spirit" (143). It's a comfort for the servant, presumably, when the master is masterful. As Colin and Mary both become more civil to and aware of others, their subordinates, including the Sowerby family and Ben Weatherstaff, devote themselves to helping them.17

While Mary is a match for Colin, he has a stature that she does not. "If he ever gets angry at me, I'll never go and see him again," Mary warns Martha. But Martha counters, "He'll have thee if he wants thee . . . Tha' may as well know that at th' start" (83). Colin and Mary struggle in a kind of mastery vacuum at Mistlethwaite; as Martha says, "Seems like there's neither Master nor Mistress except Mr. Pitcher an' Mrs. Medlock" (17). Of the servants, the narrator remarks that "when their master was away they lived a luxurious life below stairs . . . where there were four or five abundant meals eaten every day, and where a great deal of lively romping went on when Mrs. Medlock was out of the way" (33). Mrs. Medlock claims that things in the household improve as Colin begins to be tamed, in part because they couldn't get worse (120). But one wonders what the results will be when there really is a master in residence, both because Archibald Craven returns to Mistlethwaite and, it is suggested, to his role as head of the family and household, and because Colin grows more masterful.

Whereas Colin ascends from his bed and wheelchair and into mastery, Mary descends from her status as an imperious "Missie Sahib." She enters Mistlethwaite as an exile from India and as an orphan. She is of a higher status than the servants in the manor but she is not, like Archibald or Colin Craven, a master. She is a guest and a ward. Her comedown is part of the process by which Mary becomes plump, rosy, warmer, and more likeable. While she becomes less abusive, which seems like progress, she also becomes more manipulative. Early in their relationship, Mary stares at Colin, provoking him to ask her what she is thinking, and she compares his imperious conduct both to a Rajah's and to Dicken's (84). This strategy outlasts confrontation. As she tries to decide whether she can trust Colin with the secret, she proceeds by indirect: "There were certain things she wanted to find out from him, but she felt that she must find them out without asking him direct questions" (89). For example, trying to teach him the lesson she herself learned about the unpopularity of rudeness, she "sat and looked at him curiously for a few minutes . . . She wanted to make him ask her why she was doing it and of course she did" (135).18 When Mary notices that Colin has drawn back the curtain that used to cover his mother's portrait, she finds out why he did so not by asking him directly, but by sitting and looking "fixedly" at the portrait in silence: "I know what you want me to tell you," said Colin, after she had stared a few minutes. "I always know when you want me to tell you something" (155). Their dynamic is now very different from the one in which she stood up to him. Mary, who once boldly confronted Colin, now uses silence to solicit his speech. Continuing to instruct or tame him, and to extract information from him, she now employs new tactics that both imitate Dicken's animal charming techniques and correspond to her maturation into adult femininity. She also props Colin up with incantations such as "You can do it" (134).

In attempts to imagine sequels to the novel, Colin and Mary are sometimes married, as in the Hallmark film for television, Back to the Secret Garden (2001), acknowledging the ways in which the novel's plot implies marriage as one solution to the problem of Mary's uncertain status. In the novel, Colin acknowledges her as a kind of better half: "I am always better when she is with me" (112). Mary, who comes to consciousness in the "queer" realization that "she had never seemed to belong to anyone" and "never seemed to really be anyone's little girl" (9), does not really achieve such belonging in the course of the novel, no matter how much she is tamed. Archibald Craven has a hard time keeping her in mind, even after she moves into his house (69). Although he does remember her with the perfect gift, to her surprise (101), Craven does not claim Mary as his daughter or even as his niece or ward. He doesn't think of her at all on his final return to Mistlethwaite. When he enters the garden, Colin tells him the story of the garden's reclamation, not Mary; she becomes a character in Colin's tale (172). While remaining on the outskirts of this family might offer Mary a kind of freedom, it does not address her concern that she has
“never seemed to be anyone's little girl.” Those who project a marriage to Colin invent one kind of solution to that problem.

The novel ends with the following lines, from the perspective of the servants gathered in the house and looking out the window to see the outcome of Archibald Craven’s return to Misselthwaite: "Across the lawn came the Master of Misselthwaite and he looked as many of them as had never seen him. And by his side with his head up in the air and his eyes full of laughter walked as strongly and steadily as any boy in Yorkshire—Master Colin!" (173). The repetition of "Master" in these lines confirms that the plot has worked to restore the masters to Misselthwaite—and to a proper understanding of the obligations of mastery. But where are Mary and Dickon? For the moment, they've been forgotten; they have dropped back to leave the focus on the masters. Although, as many critics have pointed out, the married and tamed Katharina in The Taming of the Shrew achieves center stage and the longest speech in the play, Mary’s reward for both taming and being tamed is marginalization. Arguably, The Secret Garden subordinates her more definitively than Shrew subordinates Katharina. It is Colin who, like Katharina, is rewarded for being tamed with more lines and greater visibility; but he also earns social recognition of his mastery, the tamer’s privilege.

What Mary thinks about this ending remains something of a mystery, just as Katharina is silent at key moments in The Taming of the Shrew. Mary asks Archibald Craven for a "bit of earth"; Mary digs up the key; Mary controls knowledge of it; and Mary holds it. Although Colin wants the key and, from afar, Archibald dreams of the garden and vows to find the buried key (169), as far as we know Mary never surrenders it. This symbol of the secret, of ownership, and of access remains, so far as we know, in Mary’s possession. Mary also never tells Colin the story of what happened to his mother in the garden, keeping this history a secret from him (126).

The fact that Mary never surrenders the key leaves open the possibility that, contrary to English property law, the garden remains in some ways her own, and that even as Colin steps up and forward as the Master of Misselthwaite, she retains that possession. Yet it is also true that the key becomes irrelevant once the garden is no longer secret and need no longer be kept locked. Just as many readers of The Taming of the Shrew supply what the text does not, imagining a not-quite-tamed Katharina, or even a Katharina who cracks the whip over Petruchio after the play and the taming are over, so readers can elect to take the silences in
Since *The Secret Garden* tames both protagonists, it seems more satisfying than most shrew-taming plots, in which a man tames his wife. But Mary conspires in her own subordination, aiding Colin as he rises to mastery and then marginalizes her in the novel (and, arguably, in the house). To read the novel in this way is to argue that rather than having no plot, as has sometimes been claimed, the novel is driven by a double taming plot. It is also to argue that the disappointment many readers feel at the end is not necessarily the result of a personal failing on Burnett’s part as much as it is a problem with this tenacious narrative structure, which cannot figure out what to do with Mary once she is less contrary and has successfully rehabilitated Colin into mastery. The standoff that characterizes shrew-taming stories is both ameliorated and complicated by childhood—we need not worry yet about who might marry whom—and by triangulation. Dickon is the object of desire and emulation for both Mary and Colin, thus easing the conflict between them but also complicating the deferred conclusion. Yet the plot by which two equal protagonists become master and subordinate controls the novel’s final movement; that taming process unsettles readers who identify with Mary.

As we have seen, Burnett makes Mary both a shrew and a tamer, the mistress who masters the master of Misselthwaite. Once she has succeeded, as many critics have observed, she recedes to make way for Colin to assume his place as heir, head, and hero. Excavating the novel’s indebtedness, however unintentional, to a venerable plot exposes the interconnection between literary form and social structures. As the orphaned female relative of the masters of Misselthwaite, Mary holds a position in a structure above their servants and subordinates but below the coupled Cravens, father and son. As a young woman who potentially will marry, she is vulnerable to being subordinated to the self-effacing roles of wife and mother—self-effacing not in themselves, but as understood through the logic of the shrew-taming plot. As a result of the subordinating operations of both social structures and literary forms, while it might be possible to come up with a heroine as compelling as Mary (or Jo March, or Anne Shirley, or Rebecca Randall), it was challenging, at least in the early twentieth century when Burnett wrote, to dream up an ending for such a heroine that does not promise subordination. Succumbing to the logic of the shrew-taming plot, Burnett withdraws from Mary her own fate as head of a household and as the owner of a secret garden.
According to Thwaite, "New Thought," as they called the new realization of the power of the mind, had provided the plot (221). When The Secret Garden first came out, the American Library Association booklist called it "a new thought" story, over-sentimental and dealing almost wholly with abnormal people, "which would appeal to many women and young girls" (Thwaite 220).

For a range of interpretations of the play's ending, see, among others, Bean; Boose; Brown; Burt; Hodgdon 1–58; Kahn 104–18; and Kooza 52–75. Although she is also called Katharine and Kate, I consistently call Shakespeare’s heroine Katharine.

Wilkie describes Mary as "much tamed" (325) at the end of the novel, but claims that "it could not have been otherwise" because the novel is about progress, and Mary and Dickon represent the nature that must be superseded by Colin’s science. Thwaite and Lucie both point out the particular appeal of the fact that the children reform themselves and one another (see, e.g., Lucie 142).

Colin reactivates Mary’s contrariness, both against him and on his behalf. She says, for instance, that if members of the household wished she were dead she wouldn’t die, just to spite them (86).

For Price, the exchange in which Mary welcomes Mrs. Sowerby’s prophecy that she’ll be "like a blustery rose" when she grows up (Burnett 160), serves to predict a marriageable Mary (10).

According to Ben, Colin’s mother had kissed her beloved roses (55).

According to Jerry Phillips, "Burnett sets herself to the task of rescuing the great country house and the deceitful members of the elite class who own such properties" (947).

Both the Norton and Dover editions of The Secret Garden print "of course she did" here without comment. But it seems possible that this is a typo for "of course he did," since it is Colin who "of course" responds to Mary’s silence by asking her why she is staring at him. I have looked at various editions, including the New York Stokes edition of 1911 and the 1938 Lippincott edition and they do print "she" here. (Of course) might also imply-picker, who "of course" wants to "make" Colin ask her why she’s staring as part of the process of taming this "boy animal" by quietly observing him, calming his fears, and arousing his curiosity.

Wilkie activates pagan resonances of the Mother Goddess and her power of destruction. Some critics see the story as, in part, Burnett’s rewriting of her beloved son Lionel’s death from tuberculosis (Rector 195; Gerzina, Burnett 263; Foster and Simons 172–73; Keyser 11). Viewing the story from the mother’s point of view, rather than from Mary’s, allows one to see Colin’s resurrection entirely as gain.

Finding in the novel’s ending "not only self-condemnation and self-punishment in its treatment of Mary but an attempted redemption for wrongs Burnett may have felt she inflicted on the males closest to her," Keyser argues that Burnett punished herself for success and power by chastening her self-assertive female characters (19). Kneepfmlacher suggests that Burnett may have identified with the male characters rather than with Mary, pointing out that she was often described as "masculine" and that she confessed the wish, as a gardener, "to have been at least two strong men in one" and to have done everything herself (22).

Many children’s classics about spunky heroines either marry them off or hint at the prospective husband with whom the heroine will be rewarded for taming herself, at least to some degree. Examples would include Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Little Women, and Anne of Green Gables.

Burnett wrote The Secret Garden after her two marriages had ended, and after she had achieved the independence for which she had long articulated a desire. By the time she wrote the novel, she was mistress of her own house. Of her negative attitudes toward marriage, see Gerzina, Burnett 48, 196, 205, 219, 221, 222; and Thwaite 171, 177, 191–95, 226.

Mastery at Misselthwaite Manor

Works Cited


Cultural Authenticity in Susan Fletcher’s Shadow Spinner

Taraneh Matloob

American author Susan Fletcher’s Shadow Spinner (1998) is a fresh look at The 1,001 Nights, emphasizing the power of story and storytelling rather than retelling the old tales. The frame story of The 1,001 Nights is about the ruler Shahryar, who is enraged by his first wife’s infidelity. Believing that “women are not to be trusted” (Haddawy 4), he decides to marry a new girl every night and behead her the next morning. Shahrazad volunteers to marry the vicious Shahryar and, through telling stories over 1,001 nights, saves her own life and those of other women as well. Inspired by the ancient story of Shahrazad and Shahryar, Susan Fletcher introduces a new character, Marjan; she is a young Muslim girl, a poor orphan with a crippled foot, who attracts the attention of Shahrazad.

From the very beginning of the story, we see that “this cripple of Shahrazad’s . . . is cleverer than she looks” (38), since she knows the art of storytelling. When Marjan arrives at the palace, the higher-class children see her as “some outlandish creature” (6) with a filthy appearance, but they are soon captivated by her magic power of storytelling:

“Have you heard,” I asked the children, “the tale of the fisherman and the jinn?” . . . I held my breath then, waiting. It is not good, when telling tales, to tell too much too soon. You must cast your net, like the fisherman in the story, then wait to see what swims in. . . . The children watched me, eyes wide . . . [and] the gazelle girl said, “What did the fish . . . say?” And then I knew I had them. (7, 8) .

Fletcher’s female protagonist is not a stereotypical Eastern girl with dark hair, charming eyes, and connected eyebrows. Instead, she is an orphan deprived of parental affection and a normal life. She is not a beautiful girl, but a “crippled little monkey” (56). She achieves her power from her passion for stories and storytelling. In Fletcher’s novel, Shahrazad is running out of stories and is desperate for untold tales. She learns of Marjan’s talent for storytelling and orders the girl be brought to her chamber. Through adventures both inside and outside the harem, Marjan helps Shahrazad to find more stories, saving Shahrazad’s life.