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## Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: Girlhood in the Creation, Content, and Consumption of Victorian Children's Literature

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**Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast**

Girlhood in the Creation, Content, and Consumption of Victorian Children's Literature

Betsy Barthelemy

Honors Project in English Literature

Advisor: Andrea Kaston Tange, English

Submitted April 23, 2021

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### Introduction

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “one *ca’n’t* believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

Children's literature as we know it today was set in motion by a young English girl running amok through a dream world as an escape from real-world British feminine ideals — or, rather, a group of these heroines. The boom of novels for children being published in the United Kingdom (U.K.) from the mid-nineteenth through early 20th century is often, in scholarship, referred to as the “Golden Age of Children's Literature.” Though scholars cannot agree on an exact span of time, its bounds often end with the start of World War I (for the U.K., in 1914) and start with the 1865 emergence of one “curious” volume, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*<sup>1</sup>. Readers of Golden Age literature were themselves products of the real-world behavioral ideals of the Victorian era (1837–1901), especially the patriarchal values which society was steeped in. Prior to *Alice* and all that followed, wrote a *Daily News* reviewer in 1866, “the literature of the young had a violent, bitter, and puritanical tone, calculated rather to harden and contract than to expand and vivify the minds of its readers; and of the ‘art’ exhibited in the woodcuts and steel plates, it is sufficient to say that it was barbarous” (*Daily News*)<sup>2</sup>. The Golden Age, though, spawned a new way of writing didactically and disobediently in order to teach the country's next generation of adults to lead a more progressive life. The first and foremost way this rebellion was sparked was through the Golden Age's onslaught of strong girl protagonists: for the first time, children had heroines to look up to.

Modern scholarship written about the Golden Age often recognizes its characteristic portrayal of Victorian girlhood through these heroines. However, these works often do not do so comparatively: articles usually focus on one work or heroine from the Golden Age, or a single heroine in conversation with Carroll's Alice. If larger works such as books do draw comparisons,

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<sup>1</sup> Some, like Mariko Turk of the University of Florida, are specific, defining the era as spanning from 1865 (*Alice*) to 1926. Most describe it more broadly as the second half of the nineteenth century, or the late nineteenth to early twentieth century; the latter is how I have chosen to define the era.

<sup>2</sup> These “woodcuts and steel plates” were what we now call illustrations: pictures etched into wood and steel to be inked onto pages of periodicals and bound books.

it is between the female *authors* who contributed to this literary era and their general works, rather than the specific characters they created. This project will fill in this gap by not only directly relating and contrasting nine girl heroines from six Golden Age novels, but by doing so from a cross-genre lens. This acknowledges another pinnacle of this period: the rise of the fantasy genre, and its impact on following works of realistic fiction. By analyzing three female-led works of children's fantasy and then analyzing another three female-led works of children's realistic fiction, this project uses genre as a framework with which to examine how Golden Age literature represented girls in and out of impossible magical settings. As child readers would have read works from both genres, choosing not to focus on only one allows for a wider picture of the influence of the entire Golden Age. This highlights the important notion that these two genres informed one another to advance the broader genre of children's literature, and literary girlhood, as a whole.

Children's literature is formative to a young reader's perception of the world around them: this was especially the case in the Victorian era, when these novels were the only media available for children to consume. It should be first established, though, what "world" the Golden Age's primary audience lived in. At this moment in time in the U.K., bound volumes were much more expensive both for the press to produce and for the public to purchase. This was especially the case for books that included illustrations, which were painstakingly carved on blocks in order to be printed onto each copy. A book like *Alice*, then, with a whopping 42 illustrations to boot, would have been inaccessible at first to any children not in the upper or upper-middle class. This did not hinder *Alice's*, or any other novel's ultimate success, but limited its audience to a particular subset of the young British population. Carroll, though, upon publishing a "nursery" version of *Alice* in 1896, did feel public pressure to make the decorative

volume affordable so that it would get in the hands of young ones. He wrote, in a preface to an 1896 version of the standard *Alice*:

I take this opportunity of announcing that the Nursery “Alice,” hitherto priced at four shillings, net, is now to be had on the same terms as the ordinary shilling picture-books... Four shillings was a perfectly reasonable price to charge, considering the very heavy initial outlay I had incurred: still, as the Public have practically said “We will *not* give more than a shilling for a picture-book, however artistically got-up”, I am content to reckon my outlay on the book as so much dead loss, and, rather than let the little ones, for whom it was written, go without it, I am seeing it at a price which is, to me, much the same thing as *giving* it away. (Carroll 1896)

The “public,” to Carroll, were those of similar financial standing as he, a math professor and (at this point) incredibly successful novelist. His slightly-pompous attitude regarding his book’s pricing led him to forget about the less-wealthy children who would have also enjoyed the work.

Other authors considered the slightly-poorer classes when publishing their work, both by including them as thoughtfully-written characters and by first publishing stories, or chapters of their novels, in periodicals. The periodical press of the nineteenth century was a vibrant industry with publications ranging in theme and target audience, including many created for children. These included many gender-specific works such as *The Boy’s Own Paper* and *The Girl’s Own Paper*, and more general papers such as *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, edited by the known children’s author Margaret Gatty, and *Good Words for the Young*, edited by another well-known author, George MacDonald. To be clear, these periodicals were still only for the middle class and above: *Good Words for the Young*, for example, cost sixpence per month, “beyond the pockets of working-class boys and girls” (Lang 22). However, they nonetheless drew large audiences, and many stories which succeeded in these papers went on to be published in full, bound, sometimes illustrated volumes. The existence of these periodicals itself was a win for young people everywhere, who, as time progressed, were becoming less and less “alien” in society. “There was



no longer a sense of the child as an ‘undeveloped adult’ being pushed toward a more fully realized humanity,” Mavis Reimer writes in *Children’s Literature*; rather, childhood was becoming recognized as a separate period in one’s life (51). As this era’s importance to the child’s future adulthood was becoming apparent, a genre of literature, and an industry, was born.

“Borrowing the metaphor of colonization,” Reimer explains, “childhood suddenly was presented as ‘a thing in itself... a new world to be explored, a new species to be observed and described’” (qtd. in Reimer 51). Thus, children’s literature, a media all their own, quickly became focused on influencing the growing opinions of young minds to align with society’s. Gatty’s goal with *Aunt Judy’s Magazine*, for example, was to “lead young people to find interest and pleasure in contemplative thought” (qtd. in Lang 24). The pre-Golden Age medium for teaching literary lessons to children were conduct books and etiquette manuals, which were nonfiction, written in the first-person, and presented the ideals of the day outright: when reading these books, the imagination barely came into play<sup>3</sup>. In his introduction to the Broadview edition of *Alice*, of which he is editor, Richard Kelly explains that “The [pre-*Alice*] Victorian reader expected a children’s book to be realistic, to instruct the child in religion and morals and, consequently, to prepare him or her for a righteous adulthood,” emphasizing the rigid nature of this genre, paradoxically created for the most un-rigid of age groups (12). This all changed with the success of *Alice*, a story with a setting about as far as one could get from Victorian England: down a rabbit hole, into a literal “Wonderland.” *Alice* was not only revolutionary for its revitalization of the fairy tale, but for employing hidden lessons for a child reader to parse out and apply to their own worlds, themselves, rather than spelling them out plainly as in conduct books and the like. “Interestingly,” Laurence Talairach-Vielmas writes for *Marvels & Tales*, “just as fairy tales were making their way into the nursery, they very quickly became a means to question social,

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<sup>3</sup> An example of a conduct book is Marianne Farningham’s *Girlhood* (1869), which will be covered in Chapter One.

political, and cultural issues” (273). Somehow, literature which portrayed impossible scenes carried real-world implications and opportunities for readers to empathize with the imaginary, perhaps then shifting their worldviews; in short, reading the impossible opened young readers’ minds to what could, someday, be possible. This new genre of work, a personal, and wholly unreal novel with no outright morals,, caught on in the literary world, and became what we now call “fantasy.”

The evolving fantasy genre of the early Golden Age also inspired a new wave of realistic fiction which, though set in recognizable Victorian settings, also used hidden didacticism and narrative tactics to hopefully set up a more progressive future. When looking back at the Golden Age of Children’s Literature as a whole, then, one cannot analyze its realistic fiction without also considering its fantasy, and exploring only the fantasy, while possible, would leave a gaping hole in examining the impact of the entire era. Thus, this project examines works from both subgenres of Golden Age children’s literature separately, and in conversation with one another. However, for a more nuanced analysis, the lessons authors embedded into their works for children to make sense of themselves must be considered: and, at this point in history, many pertained to the patriarchy and public perception and treatment of women and girls.

Much more of the work born out of the Golden Age features girl protagonists than work of children’s literature from any era prior<sup>4</sup>. Heroines preceding *Alice*, Kelly writes, were “‘girl angels fated for an early death,’ or ‘impossibly virtuous little ladies,’ such as Goody Two-Shoes<sup>5</sup>, or ‘naughty girls who eventually reform in response to heavy adult pressure’” (Kelly 14); in each of these cases, success and empowerment are clearly left out the young girls’ endings. However,

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<sup>4</sup> One could argue that Hans Christian Andersen’s and the Brothers’ Grimm’s fairy tales featured enough women to rival the Golden Age; however, most of these characters are either adults, or end up dying at the end — or both. See pp. 55–6.

<sup>5</sup> Referencing the titular girl character in John Newberry’s *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1765).

the Golden Age was an era in which the experience and perception of girlhood and womanhood were evolving faster than ever before, and the suffrage movement was slowly on the rise. This period also featured a prominent rise in female authorship across genres, but in children's literature in particular. Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, in their co-authored book *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*, remind readers that "British law made the link between women and children indelible by denying women independent legal representation" (1). Women's rights were not much wider in scope than children's, signifying an assumed incompetence for important societal matters; but some were using their voices, and their pens, to change minds. For young girls to see heroic figures who looked a lot like themselves, then, was a radical awakening to a new day ahead. Though some heroines, like *Alice's* titular character, were written by men, all were positioned as rebellious and unapologetic for their unladylike behavior; these girls played, adventured, and even spoke just like their male counterparts, and succeeded while doing so. Femininity's combined representation in the Victorian publishing industry's bylines and plots, then, was radical, influential, and incredibly important, encouraging young girls for the first time to propel their imaginations to believe "as many as six impossible things before breakfast" (Carroll 1872; 81).

This project uses this femininity as a framework through which to analyze works of Golden Age children's fantasy and realistic fiction novels: how the texts portrayed girlhood, their narrative tactics, the symbols behind which lessons were hidden, and, of course, the authors and readers who solidified these stories' places in history. Six primary works published between 1865 and 1911 — thus nearly encompassing the entire span of the Golden Age — and their authors will be explored. Three of these novels are works of fantasy: Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and Christina

Georgina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1876). The remaining three are works of realistic fiction: Juliana Horatia Ewing's *Mrs. Overthway's Remembrances* (1869), E. Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers* (1899), and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911)<sup>6</sup>. Each of these works is an example of a representation of childrens', and especially girls' autonomy in the incredibly influential genre of children's literature. By first using genre as a lens, and then widening its scope to the entire Golden Age, this project aims to draw conclusions how this autonomy was conveyed to readers with or without the presence of magic to aid it. This framework is largely absent from modern scholarship surrounding the Golden Age, but is hugely important to defining the era and the flourish of heroines which it brought to the forefront of literature. Studying this period in this way allows for additional insight into the novels' impact on child readers when considering their collective lessons about showing emotions and playing adventurously, and their intentional portrayal of girls on equal footing with their male counterparts. After all, these readers would soon grow up to be the next generation of adults creating the rules of society: when literature showed children the opportunities for happy endings after rebelling against rigid Victorian norms, the possibilities for the future were endless.

In order to focus on the ways the nuances of these books work together, and perhaps at odds with one another, in later chapters, I will first provide contextual information about each work<sup>7</sup>. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was written by Charles Ludwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll; its heroine, Alice, is based on a real child, Alice Liddel. The fictional Alice spends her story wandering through "Wonderland," meeting creatures who speak in puzzles and rhymes, and culminates with a croquet match with the antagonist, the Queen of

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<sup>6</sup> *The Secret Garden* was technically written in the Edwardian, not Victorian, era; the former started in 1901. However, it is still a Golden Age work, and many scholars lump it in with Victorian literature, as Burnett grew up immersed in Victorian girlhood mentalities.

<sup>7</sup> The short statements in this introduction are meant to serve as refreshers for each story. For more in-depth information about each author and summaries of each novel, see Appendices A–F.

Hearts. MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* follows the young Princess Irene as she, with help from her magical great-great-grandmother and a miner's son, Curdie, attempts to expel an evil species of goblins from her kingdom — her antagonist, like Alice Liddell's, is the goblins' queen. *Speaking Likenesses* was written in response to the huge success of *Alice*, which Rossetti saw as a male appropriation of the female narrative (Knoepfmacher 302). It presents the stories of three heroines — Flora, Edith, and Maggie — via an unnamed aunt who acts as a storyteller to her young nieces, and is distinctly unhappy. Each of these fantasy works highlights the impossibility of its respective magical settings as its heroine(s)'s adventures unfold.

The realistic fiction works, meanwhile, do not have this advantage, and thus their heroines' journeys are less pronounced. *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances* is a somewhat mundane story about a young orphan, Ida, listening to her elderly neighbor, who she calls "Mrs. Overtheway," tell stories about her life; Ewing used it to show readers how to live vicariously through another person's story. *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* is a novel made up of vignettes; each chapter is a small adventure in which siblings, Dora, Oswald, Dicky, Alice, Noël, and H. O. Bastable attempt to secure a small fortune for their father. Finally, *The Secret Garden* tells the story of Mary Lennox, a hyperbolically-poorly-behaved young orphan who moves from India to England to live with her uncle. Mary's new home features a secret garden which has been locked for a decade, which she and her new friend Dickon succeed in opening and revitalizing; along the way, Mary grows into a beautiful and lively child, and becomes a positive influence on her equally-disrespectful cousin, Colin. These novels barely leave the safety of the characters' homes, but still showed female readers their potential to thrive.

Examining these six works together and grouped by genre illuminates the strategies Golden Age authors used to convey the more progressive future possible for children, young

girls in general, if their readers were to seize the opportunity to create it. Fantasy authors utilized the plausible deniability of the presence of magic — which parents would happily recognize could never come to life — and framing the stories as all being dreams at their endings, thus further distancing the rebellious heroines from reality. Sebag-Montefiore praises the Golden Age's embracing of the genre, writing "The Victorian fairy tale flowered as writers converted its ancient literary function of social commentary into a criticism of current mores and vehicle of visionary ideals" (40-1). The success of the genre "license[d] a new generation of writers as well as readers to be deviant, angry, even violent or satirical" without as much pushback from rigid Victorian society as novels without the scapegoat of a different reality (Auerbach & Knoepfelmacher 3).

That being said, the boom of fantasy and the new rhetorical techniques that came with it evidently inspired a subversive nature in writers of realistic fiction, making the Golden Age of Children's Literature a non-genred category of work. Even if a work of fiction does not openly support the suffrage movement, watching Victorian girlhood from a removed audience position makes it so, as Andrea Kaston writes for *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, "we are forced—as these small heroines are—to confront some of the hardships of growing up female in Victorian England" (326). Preceding children's fantasy's means of hiding didacticism, toying with narration, and emphasis on the importance of storytelling, laid the groundwork for more inclusive fiction which made the Golden Age so iconic as a whole. Fiction authors — many of whom, including Ewing, Nesbit, and Burnett, also dabbled in fantasy writing — were able to take the concepts revolutionized in fantasy writing and transfer them into realistic settings. With the bridging of these two subgenres, writes Barbara Wall, "a new children's literature had begun. Children were now to have a literature that was wholly for them" (177).

Each of these six texts was picked intentionally, based on their authors, their popularity, and the elements of the stories. An exploration of each of these works could be a project on its own; seeing how they relate and contrast, though, is particularly important in tracking the impact and presentation of the all-important Golden Age heroine. The first chapter of this project lays additional context to the era in which these texts were written and their authors lived; to make an argument about the Victorian era's continued pigeonholing of women into domestic ideals, the chapter places specific emphasis on the four female authors in this project and their feminine experiences publishing in a patriarchal world. The second chapter focuses on the three works of fantasy: the genre of fantasy itself, the narrative techniques on which it is built, and, most significantly, on the heroines which led them to success. Textual elements such as setting, behavior, narration, and the fantasy scapegoat ending will be analyzed to argue that these novels boasted hidden hero(in)ic didacticism. The third chapter turns to the heroines of the realistic fiction works, and how their lessons are conveyed without the tint of a fantastical setting shadowing their triumphs. Using similar analyses of narrators and emotion, and with specific emphasis on the act of storytelling as a motif, this chapter argues that these heroines are defined in a similarly-subversively rebellious way.

Following the analyses of the genres and all six heroines, this project will draw conclusions about how these novels' representations of autonomous girlhood — the Golden Age's hallmark addition to literary discourse — impacted the child readers in their original audiences. This is a cross-genre argument surrounding the texts' implications which, to my knowledge, has not yet been contributed to scholarship surrounding the Golden Age. To emphatically dub an era of media production and consumption "Golden," examining its impact on society is key — especially considering the malleable audience of the next generation of

adults. In order to support these conclusions, though, one must first consider the cultural context of girlhood, womanhood, and female authorship in Victorian England on which this entire project is based.



## Chapter One

### Attempting the Pen: the Women Behind the Golden Age

“Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,  
Such an intruder on the rights of men,  
Such a presumptuous Creature, is esteem'd,  
The fault, can by no vertue be redeem'd.  
They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;  
Good breeding, fassion, dancing, dressing, play  
Are the accomplishments we shou'd desire;  
To write, or read, or think, or to enquire  
Wou'd cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time;  
And interrupt the Conquests of our prime;  
Whilst the dull mannage, of a servile house  
Is held by some, our outmost art, and use.”

— Anne Kingsmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1713)

## Introduction

Not only did the second half of the nineteenth century host a surge of new literature for children, but it hosted more female bylines than any era before. This does not indicate a sudden increase in the publishing industry's accessibility to women, though time did play a role in this — rather, nineteenth-century women writers opened these doors for themselves based on collective tenacity and influence. How the likes of Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, Rossetti, and many others<sup>8</sup> all found themselves gaining fame via children's literature, though, is described by Julia Briggs as “a coincidence of timing in that women began to take up writing as a profession at about the same time as books specifically written for children began to be published in any numbers; and a coincidence of interests, in that women were committed to the nursery world as mothers, nurses, or governesses in a way that few men were” (223). Though the ideas Briggs highlights are spot on, her use of the word “coincidence” is misleading: a large number of cogs had to fit together to cause this grand flourish of the feminine pen. From the societal and maternal influences of their own childhoods and the changing feminist airs of the Victorian era, to their means of breaking into the industry via pen names, periodicals, their husbands, or some combination, to their careful crafting of the rebellious heroines, female authors were hugely responsible for the Golden Age of Children's Literature being golden. Their work in the publishing sphere and on the physical page heavily influenced the minds of their young readers — the next generation of adults, and the next generation of writers — for decades to come.

Female authorship in general soared in the nineteenth century compared to the centuries prior. Most notably, the Brontë sisters and George Eliot<sup>9</sup> made their classic contributions to the

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<sup>8</sup> Another prominent female author from the Golden Age was Mary Louisa Molesworth, who published work under the names “Mrs. Molesworth” and “Ennis Graham.” More on her can be found in *Mrs. Molesworth: A Biography* by Jane Cooper (2002).

<sup>9</sup> George Eliot was a male pseudonym for the literary powerhouse Marianne Evans. Though it was well-known that Evans was Eliot, her work was published under this name for her entire career, and the *nom de plume* is even more

British catalogue — novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Middlemarch*, to name a few, remain prominent in literary discourse even today. Even at a time in which any female representation was only just finding its way into the norm, there was a classism-like divide between “adult” fiction authors and children’s authors. The first chapter of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* elaborates on this, even quoting Eliot:

Denied the economic, special, and psychological status ordinarily essential to creativity; denied the right, skill, and education to tell their own stories with confidence, women who did not retreat into angelic silence seem at first to have had very limited options. On the one hand, they could accept their “parsley wealth” of self-denial, writing in “lesser” genres—children’s books, letters, diaries—or limiting their readership to “mere” women like themselves and producing what George Eliot called “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” (71-2)

Perhaps women were not building each other up, even as they collectively began to see success. This divide may stem from the act of breaking gender barriers in a shattering versus quiet nature. Writes Deborah Thacker for *The Lion and the Unicorn*, “the proximity of children’s literature to the domestic, nurturing, maternal, and thus, the feminine sphere can be seen as a contributing factor in the marginalization of the subject in academic discourses” (3). Novels such as Eliot’s *Middlemarch* were and remain iconic not only because of their content, but because of their authorship, which showed the public that the eloquence and insight in a woman’s writing could absolutely hold a candle to that in a man’s. “Because they are by definition male activities... writing, reading, and thinking are not only alien but also inimical to ‘female’ characteristics,” Gilbert and Gubar explain, adding the example, “in a famous letter to Charlotte Brontë, Robert Southey rephrased the same notion: ‘Literature is not the business of a woman’s life, and it cannot be’” (8).

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prominent than her given name on her gravestone. For more on Eliot, see *A Cambridge Companion to George Eliot* (2001).

Children's literature — especially non-fantastical works — was thought to be safer and less provocative than texts written for adults. These assumptions, combined with the genre's closeness to the motherhood role women still found themselves stuck in, could very well have been frustrating for authors such as Eliot to see. However, it is important to note the profound influence children's literature has on children — future adults — and their families. With regards to Nesbit's work, Briggs writes, "Children's books are not written by children for children but by adults for adults, since it is the *adult* who provides the money to buy the book and who is therefore *the most immediate consumer of the product*" (223; my emphasis). Not only did their parents read the books with the children, these young readers would grow up to fill the roles of revolutionaries in the following decades. For example, Nesbit was an avid reader of Ewing's work, and grew up to be a prolific writer of the late Golden Age in both fantasy and fiction. Considering slow-moving generational influence, children's literature was and is absolutely a medium which can inspire future change — much more rebellious, then, than Eliot presumed.

Once immersed in the children's sphere — for whatever reason — these authors seemed less inclined to draw clear boundaries between portrayals of fantasy worlds versus real life. Apart from the broad Golden Age, female authors and female heroines played an enormous role in the evolution of the fantasy genre within the era. Fantasy works may have drawn skepticism from more 'serious' writers like Eliot; or, quite the opposite, this genre may have been seen as brave. Far off lands, magical encounters, and thrilling adventures were a far cry from what female authors were expected to write, given their positions in the home. To compare these with fictitious works and draw conclusions about Golden Age novels in general, it is important to first recognize the groundbreaking nature of fantasy novels, starting with *Alice's Adventures in*

*Wonderland* in 1865. Between the feminist minds and feminist characters that led the way to the twentieth century, Honig, quoting Knoepfelmacher, writes:

...the mode of fantasy especially worked to free the same independent and aggressive impulses that the realistic fiction of the era worked consciously to domesticate. Knoepfelmacher states that with the freedom provided by the fantastic mode, even women writers who felt a need to “maintain restraint and decorum... began to portray little girls who were allowed to express hostility without the curbs on female rebelliousness that had been placed earlier, in children’s literature...” (70)

Though I do not mean to make the argument that fiction authors domesticated their heroines, Honig’s point is important in that it identifies fantasy as a means of escape from the barriers of reality. Existing in a fantasy world comes with the assumption that all real-world rules are thrown out the window; existing in a realistic fiction set in the home, however, carries the connotations of the norms within that setting. In order to understand how these two contrasting genres were utilized to empower heroines, though, we must first lay context for the authors who brought the Golden Age to life, and the child readers — especially the girls — who propelled these novels to success.

### **Victorian Girlhood and Inherited Angelic Adulthood**

Whether or not they were women, each of this project’s six primary authors grew up all too cognizant of a girl’s, and by extension a woman’s, place in society. This came via two main modes: their lessons and societal discourse, and their mothers and close female family members. For the female authors, their lived experiences of society also served as heavy influence over their worldviews; Carroll and MacDonald, empathetic as they believed themselves to be, could never have fully grasped living in Victorian England without their male privilege tainting all perspectives. The frameworks with which both the men and women viewed a woman’s place in

their society both stemmed from one incredibly influential concept of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century womanhood: the “Angel in the House.”

The term “Angel in the House” can be traced back to a widely-known longform poem of the same name, written by Coventry Patmore in 1856. In this case, the “Angel” was his own wife, and the poem uses her as the chief example of the angel-wife which all women should aspire to be, despite the ideal role being financially-unattainable for most (Patmore). Patmore’s work is based on the societal norm of women being only wives and mothers: as Elaine Showalter eloquently puts it, “Victorian women were not accustomed to choosing a vocation; womanhood was a vocation in itself” (qtd. in Honig 11). Even into the nineteenth century, when women were allowed to get increasing amounts of education — compared to, for example, Sarah Fielding’s readers in the previous century, whose “fantasy” stories took place in schoolhouses (Briggs) — “even a modern education did little to change the prospects of the Victorian girl. She was still expected to be ornamental, domesticated, and submissive” (Honig 69). An educated woman was a wife who could keep up conversation with her husband about his interests; if she were to use her knowledge to profess her own thoughts, though, the Victorians still found this attitude unconventional. Female authorship, therefore, made waves — unless, of course, these texts were woman-to-woman instructions regarding how to maintain the angelic identity.

“Of course,” Gilbert and Gubar assert, “from the eighteenth century on, conduct books for ladies had proliferated, enjoining young girls to submissiveness, modesty, self-lessness; reminding all women that they should be angelic” (23). A prime example of a popular ‘conduct book’ was Marianne Farningham’s *Girlhood* (1869). Right around the time Alice Liddel was leading girls from across Britain down the rabbit hole, Farningham made it her purpose to remind girls what it was to be womanly, dignified, resolute, influential, and honest, to name a

few subjects. “Happy girls are those who are content to perform each duty as it comes patiently and conscientiously,—who think a great deal more about their work than happiness,” she advises her readers (77); later, she goes on to implore that “girls never look so attractive as when they are busied about the little home matters which contribute to the pleasure and comfort of those whom she loves” (105). This type of language was a far cry from Alice’s journey through Wonderland, about as far away from her home as she could be. Though Farningham<sup>10</sup> was herself a female author breaking into the publishing industry in the nineteenth century, her intentions were anything but rocking the boat. Rather than including girl characters who go on adventures like Alice Liddell or Alice Bastable, she reminds her readers that “the speech of womanhood should be always gentle” (Farningham 23). However, she was not completely stuck in the past. Given her own lack of steady education, Farningham used her platform to remind girls of its importance, writing that “every girl should try to educate herself” if they face the same barriers which she did (36). Even alongside this worldly encouragement, she lays clear boundaries for girls who are growing into young women, reminding them to “remain girls while you may,” but that they will eventually age and leave these carefree behaviors behind (24). She warns her readers, “We have seen those who were quick-tempered or passionate in childhood, grow agreeable and amiable in youth. We have seen others, who were uneducated, grow cultivated and refined” (16). Her short chapters serve as reminders for growing girls who will soon reach ‘womanliness’ and serve in that vocation for the remainder of their days, hopefully as mothers.

All of my primary authors are related in that they were raised by mothers. So, even if they did not read works like Farningham’s as they grew up, the most important influence on their evolving concepts of womanliness was, for better or worse, right in front of them. Perhaps

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<sup>10</sup> Marianne Farningham was a pseudonym for Mary Anne Hearn, who also published work under the name Eva Hope. Much of her writing was based in Christianity. More about her outside of *Girlhood* can be found in her 1907 autobiography *A Working Woman’s Life*.

different from their mothers' era, Victorian girls were in fact educated and not discouraged to read. However, since all their novels were purchased by the adults who cared for them, this inherited practice “encouraged girls to approach reading as a means of reinforcing their connection to their mothers—by deferring to their mothers’ choices and reading aloud with them—rather than a means of achieving separation and constructing an independent identity” (Bilston 14). While the public portrayal of girlhood and womanhood was newly evolving in this era — within in the context of its unwavering definition in the decades preceding — the image of the Angel in the House was not completely struck down, even by women who sought to make careers for themselves in the publishing sphere and beyond. Maternal influence — even despite the lack of overbearing mothers in the authors’ texts — played a huge role in how girlhood was written into fiction. Honig elaborates:

In general, women authors were no more daring about flouting the convention of the ideal mother than the men were. As writers, they were the independent women of the day, the ones whose everyday working lives did fly in the face of convention. Still, they were raised and steeped in that convention. Their lives might not conform to it in every detail, but they were products of a generation that espoused the cult of True Womanhood. (13)

Though “cult” takes this relationship a bit far, the experience of being a middle-class woman in Victorian England was a fairly-unified one. Though no two households could be the same, women’s abilities to empathize with one another’s experiences and aspirations, from growing up to mothering themselves, was crucial in the success of woman-led texts.

This is not to say that the authors’ mothers, or sisters, for that matter, were keeping a watchful eye on all of their published work, or were fully against their daughters “flying in the face of convention.” Ewing’s mother, Margaret Gatty, was herself a successful children’s writer, and edited *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* before Ewing stepped in at the time of her death (Cashdan 217). However, it is important to note the leaps women such as Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, and



Rossetti were taking by putting their work out for the public to consume, and for writing leading ladies who went on adventures outside of the house which mothers were expected to be confined to. Fighting the concept of the Angel in the House, even without directly addressing the concept of the ideal mother, was an important step in a feminist direction. Girl readers, remember, were still expected to grow into mothers; when they did, thanks in part to the Golden Age, they met this job with open minds regarding what their daughters could be. “Readers are being trained to become the authors of ‘maternal counsel’ seeking to produce a daughter who will become, in turn, a regulatory mother,” Sarah Bilston explains in *Nineteenth Century Contexts*. “‘Maternal counsel’ is more than a means of molding a girl, it is the narrative a daughter must learn to produce; narrative and narrative production are therefore at the very heart of the cycle of mother/daughter identification sketched in these texts” (4). In writing rebellious heroines, then, authors defied this inherited maternal counsel which children’s texts usually delivered, instead teaching readers that they did not have to fit entirely inside society’s mold.

Not all heroine-led children’s texts fought the Angel in the House head-on. Ewing’s *Ida*, for example, only ventures outside once in the entire story, and when she does she is punished by catching an awful bout of illness (Ewing 20). But their very presence in the industry was enough to turn heads, and start a domino effect of more and more women writing more and more rebellious girls into the Golden Age. Nesbit, like many others, started her literary career sharing a pseudonym, Fabian Bland<sup>11</sup>, with her husband Hubert when publishing in periodicals, and even after branching out did so under her own pseudonym, “E” (Fitzsimons 67). And while each of my six primary works was successful enough to be remembered over a century later — all but *Speaking Likenesses* and *Mrs. Overtheway’s Remembrances* are still in print — the idea of

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<sup>11</sup> Not to be confused with the couple’s son Fabian Bland (1885-1900), who was named after this and the literary group, “The Fabian Society,” which the Blands founded. See Fitzsimons, chapter 5.

feminine adventure tokened by *Alice*, often paired with the pen of a female author, was first met with some skepticism. This was the case with all female authors of the time, even outside of the realm of children's literature which featured the dual consumership of child and parent.

Showalter writes, "the expression of these 'unfeminine' feelings may be construed as signs of madness" (212). Given the mass public attention that published authors receive, fearing rejection or being labelled something so undesirable as 'mad' could very well have pushed many women away from the idea of writing — or, this idea could have ignited the brave urge to challenge the norm, which Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, and Rossetti all acted on.

Decades after Alice ventured down the rabbit hole and the Bastables dug for treasure in their yard, the acclaimed English female novelist Virginia Woolf, here through the elaboration of Gilbert and Gubar, put plainly and emphatically:

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, however, she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her "incontanancy" and—by identifying her with the "eternal types" they have themselves invented—to possess her more thoroughly. Specifically... a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of "angel" and "monster" which male authors have generated for her. *Before women can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must "kill" the "angel in the house."* (16-17; my emphasis)

On the surface, Woolf's reasoning holds true, and she herself actively worked against the angelic norm which was pushed on her. However, in doing this, Showalter explains that "when Woolf looked at her sister-writers she readily perceived how their circumstances as women had made them weak; she was not as quick to see where they had been strong" (209). Her view of other, 'tamer' women was nearly akin to Eliot's view of women who wrote children's novels rather than serious literature for adults — they failed to see the significance of small rebellions. For women in publishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tension between

staying true to their roles within the home and paving a path for their young readers to escape the norm was always apparent and often difficult to wrestle with. So, while it is true to argue that “The battle to stay alive, to fight for one’s emotional independence against the smothering embrace of the Angel, is fought repeatedly in women’s literature,” one cannot study this niche within literature without remembering that not all Angels were locked inside the House: some filled this position willingly (Showalter 210). Authors of conduct books, like Farningham, were still female authors, and though their works were set comfortably inside the home, they should not be forgotten. All examples of female authorship, regardless of genre, showed Victorian girls a new possibility for womanhood, and thus broke the cycles of maternal counsel and inherited angelicity.

### **The Emerging Female Author in the Victorian Sphere**

Thacker makes the important point that “While the recuperations of women as writers is a prominent and lasting effect of the advent of feminist criticism, children’s literature that offers a feminine approach to discourse is not authored exclusively by women, just as female authorship can, and often does, impose a masculinist discourse” (5). Before continuing, it is important to note that two of the six authors I have chosen to study are in fact men; further, Alice Liddell is perhaps the most iconic female heroine of the Golden Age, and she was created by a man. In the introduction to their book *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers*, Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher write,

Cultural and economic pressures made it more acceptable for women to write for children than for other adults, but the most acclaimed writers of Victorian children’s fantasies were three eccentric men—Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and James Barrie<sup>12</sup>—whose obsessive nostalgia for their own

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<sup>12</sup> James Barrie, also known as J.M. Barrie, is best known for creating the character Peter Pan and his home of Neverland; he first published *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up* as a play in 1904, and after its success

idealized childhoods inspired them to imagine dream countries in which no one had to grow up... Carroll, MacDonald, and Barrie envied the children they could not be; out of this envious longing came their painful children's classics. (1)

All literary texts within a broad genre such as children's literature should be studied on equal footing, regardless of the gender of their authors. However, given the Golden Age's importance in the wave of new feminine authorship, this chapter focuses on the latter four female authors whose works I am studying. This does not discredit Carroll's and MacDonald's hugely-important contributions to this era in the slightest; rather, it emphasizes the importance of femininity in the Golden Age in all aspects, from the stories' conceptions to their plots themselves.

It was not unknown for women to author books at the start of the Victorian era; however, imaginative storytelling was still a man's profession, and women were expected to keep even their minds within their husbands' homes. Analyses of literature from this era are filled with masculine references and images which made it so the discipline was inherently gendered in society. *Alice* scholarship, for example, often connects various aspects of Wonderland to sexuality and phallic symbolism<sup>13</sup>. Gilbert and Gubar elaborate on this rhetorical strategy:

Though many of these writers use the metaphor of literary paternity in different ways and for different purposes, all seemed overwhelmingly to agree that a literary text is not only speech quite literally embodied, but also power mysteriously made manifest, mad flesh. In patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a *father*, a *progenitor*, a *procreator*, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim. (6; my emphasis)

The overwhelming popularity of Christianity — both in literature and in general British society — added to this metaphor. Belief in “a solitary Father God as the only creator of all things” went

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turned it into a novel, *Peter Pan and Wendy*, in 1911. More information about Barrie and Peter can be found in Anthony Lane's piece for *The New Yorker*, “Why J.M. Barrie Created Peter Pan” (2004).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Richard Feldstein's “The Phallic Gaze of Wonderland” (1995).

hand-in-hand with notions of *literary* creation (Gilbert & Gubar 7), hence the oft-noted phallic qualities of the pen, as seen in the chapter's epigraph<sup>14</sup>. The widespread connection between the Father God and the Father Author "no doubt prevented many women from ever 'attempting the pen' ...and caused enormous anxiety in generations of those women who were 'presumptuous' enough to dare such an attempt" (7).

Thus, the first means to publication for many women was the pseudonym — overtly male names such as George Eliot's, ambiguous names such as E. Nesbit's, and even different female names, disguising only their personal identities, like Marianne Farningham's<sup>15</sup>. Hidden identities kept them and their families out of any harmful public spotlight; Eliot, for example, called her pseudonym "a tub to throw to the whale in case of curious inquiries."<sup>16</sup> Women who chose to publish under their real names were often confined to more stereotypically-feminine texts, such as conduct books, so as not to be written off by society. "The literary woman has always faced equally degrading options when she had to define her public presence in the world," Gilbert and Gubar explain, adding, "If she did not suppress her work entirely or publish it pseudonymously or anonymously, she could modestly confess her female 'limitations' and concentrate on the 'lesser' subjects reserved for ladies as becoming to their inferior powers" (67). If women chose to publish with fictional names, however, their public identities would be fully separate from the works, allowing their texts and leading ladies to gain acclaim on their own, and eventually the authors could make their identities known. Carroll's motivation in creating a fake persona was

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<sup>14</sup> Anne Kingmill Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, was a seventeenth and eighteenth century poet whose work often focused on the hardships of being a female author in a man's world. Her poetry often referenced other active female writers in her era. More about her work and impact can be found in Barbara McGovern's *Anne Finch and Her Poetry: a Critical Biography* (1992).

<sup>15</sup> Other pseudonyms of note from the Victorian era included Ennis Graham (Mary Louisa Molesworth) and Currer Bell (Charlotte Brontë).

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in the essay "A Woman with Many Names" by Rosemarie Bodenheimer (*A Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 2001)

similar: to simultaneously preserve his serious mathematician's demeanor and write wild nonsense novels for children (Kelly 246).

Pseudonyms or not, all Victorian female writers faced identity issues. Given the stereotypical womanly vocations that society wished them to take, and their already-large act of defiance in publishing at all, writing rebellious young women into their texts, as well, was often too big a leap. "Society had already instilled in them deep guilt feelings about being writers," Honig explains. "They may have felt the need to compromise with society by writing texts with traditional messages" (13-4). This is the case with Farningham, as well as other famous female-written non-Golden Age texts such as *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*<sup>17</sup>. It was not as harmful for women to publish texts which promoted the ideals of the Angel in the House: in the Victorian era, publishing itself was an act of public exposure, bringing the Angel out of the House. Even if their writing promoted stifling ideas, their feminine bylines pioneered a bright future.

Woman authors were also known to get their jumpstarts in the publishing sphere in periodicals, such as *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, and *The Pall Mall Magazine*. Serializing fiction was a popular way to publish at the time not only because it was less expensive than printing and binding whole volumes, but due to its manipulation into a literary device. Stories having to be published over multiple issues of a periodical inspired a mini-story chapter structure, the likes of which is present in *Mrs. Overthway's Remembrances*, *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers*, and even *Speaking Likenesses*, which was published as a single-volume. In her article "Stories by Bits: The Serial Family in

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<sup>17</sup> Isabella Beeton was a journalist and writer who lived in the early nineteenth century. Her work was published in her husband's journal, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, before this, her all-encompassing guide for women running Victorian homes. Her's was a household name even after her untimely death in 1865. For more on Beeton, see *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs. Beeton* by Kathryn Hughes (2006).

Juliana Horatia Ewing's 'Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances'" for *Victorian Review*, Meghan Rosing relates the serial novel to a "serial" family<sup>18</sup>, writing:

The serial family in *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances* and Victorian serial fiction more widely allows those deemed socially insignificant—children, the elderly, and the unattached—to be more than useless fragments left over after the disintegration of the traditional family, to be instead members of a capacious serial family whose stories become the 'bits' of an infinitely extendable serial story. (160)

In this sense, the periodical press did both Golden Age heroines and female authors a favor.

Publishing via the periodical press was a given for writers like Ewing, who started out by writing stories to fill empty space in *Aunt Judy's Magazine* while her mother was its editor, and thus had a clear path to the masses (Cashdan 216). Nesbit was known to publish her shorter works, including poetry, in the likes of *Pall Mall Magazine*, *Longman's Magazine*, and *Nister's Holiday Magazine*: these early short stories included some scenes which eventually made it into Bastable books (Fitzsimons 25). The joy of seeing her byline in print for the world to consume — her act of courage having come to fruition — was huge for her; in her diaries, she wrote, "The first poem I ever had published... was printed in the Sunday Magazine. When I got the proof I ran round the garden shouting 'Hooray!' at the top of my voice, to the scandal of the village and the vexation of my family" (qtd. in Fitzsimons 44). Nesbit knew and inspired Rossetti, who published her poetry in the same fashion before writing the longer stories which became *Speaking Likenesses*<sup>19</sup>. This was also a useful means to gather feedback from child readers, not just adults reviewers; "Even after the instalment [sic] of *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances* appeared, readers wrote to *Aunt Judy's Magazine* requesting sequels," Rosing writes (157).

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<sup>18</sup> More on Ida and Mrs. Overtheway's chosen family can be found in Chapter Three.

<sup>19</sup> Nesbit's biographer, Eleanor Fitzsimons, writes that Nesbit's connection to Rossetti steered her to become a poet, a role which jump-started her iconic publishing career (35).

However, their means of publishing was a separate beast from their means of telling the stories themselves. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, women were still not fully voiced in the public eye. “As writers, however, they were in the unique position of being able to air their views if they could only manage to do so without censure,” Honig writes, elaborating:

Women writers were in a particularly precarious position in this regard. They were already engaged in what was an accepted masculine pursuit—the use of the pen (a definite phallic symbol). In order to preserve their femininity, women were accustomed to belittling their art as mere scribbling, a drawing room accomplishment, and they were very guarded about further damaging their feminine image by not only writing, but presenting female characters whose vigor and strength might be regarded as masculine traits. (70-1)

Again, the notion of the pen as an extension of masculine rule in describing it as phallic was not an uncommon way of thinking in the Victorian era. It is not unimaginable that even established female authors would gaslight themselves; for example, Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*, made note of her ‘silly girl stories’ in prologues of her novels<sup>20</sup>.

Nesbit, especially, is an interesting case. When putting works such as *Treasure-Seekers* in the same heroine-touting class as Carroll’s *Alice* books, the Bastable sisters seem almost too textbook: Dora is the mother figure, while Alice, “the more tomboyish of the two sisters” is becoming more and more separated from her brothers as she ages<sup>21</sup> (Smith 158). “This confusion in [Nesbit’s] feelings about women’s rights comes through at times in her portrayal of heroines who are adventurous, energetic, and yet somehow curiously bound to their time and their society—generally much more conventional in outlook than their author” (Honig 97). Nesbit herself did not try to blend in with conventional women of her day — fellow Fabian H. G. Wells

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<sup>20</sup> Unlike other female writers of her day, Alcott’s diaries and correspondence reveal that she did not enjoy writing *Little Women* but did so after being asked to write girls’ stories. She never seemed to grow fond of her most famous work. For more on Alcott’s relationship with her classic, see *The Washington Post*’s “Girls adored ‘Little Women.’ Louisa May Alcott did not” (2019).

<sup>21</sup> The Bastable sisters will be more substantially covered in Chapter Three.



once called both Nesbit and the Bastables “anarchist,” writing that Nesbit’s “soul was against the government all the time” (qtd. in Smith 154). However, despite the family’s tirades, Dora did, and Alice was beginning to.

It is said that Nesbit wrote herself into the Bastables not through Dora or Alice, but through Noël, Alice’s poetic twin brother; she also chose to have Oswald, not Dora (the eldest sibling), narrate the stories. Adults reading *Treasure-Seekers* may have caught her reasoning behind this — Oswald’s (albeit childish) tinges of satirical chauvinism — but her target audience may have had a harder time picking up her cues. In her 1974 article for *Children’s Literature*, Barbara Smith explains:

If Oswald is E. Nesbit’s vehicle for expressing dissatisfaction with women’s position in late Victorian society, his anti-female declarations are so similar in tone to those made by actual male supremacists that few readers would realize that she was not supporting the status quo... If [her] purpose was to satirize the attitudes of her contemporaries toward women and the poor, she does it so subtly that few children would be able to see through the stereotyped images she presents to the protest underneath. (157, 163)

It would take perhaps more nuance than a child reader could muster to see the irony in Oswald’s sexist statements. For example, in his narration, he at one point tells his readers, “It is not right to let girls smoke. They get to think too much of themselves if you let them do everything the same as men” (Nesbit 1899; 162). To an analytical scholar, this is clearly satire by the author: Nesbit herself was an avid smoker (Smith 153). To a young child who did not know Nesbit, though, it would be much easier to absorb this as a piece of misogynistic, stereotypical advice<sup>22</sup>.

If Nesbit were indeed clearly more rebellious than the average Victorian woman, then, why did she not take a clearer risk when including (or not including) Dora and Alice into the Bastables’ adventures? Though she herself never addressed this, it may definitely be inferred as

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter Three for more on Nesbit’s use of Oswald’s narration as a tool.

the author playing it safe for the benefit of the text. It is important to note that Nesbit was raising a family amidst marital turmoil, and her husband was also a writer: though she was not poor, money was always on her mind. Smith reminds her readers, “E. Nesbit usually wrote under the constraint to earn money and therefore to please her publishers and the public, if not always herself,” and thereby had to veil her own feelings about femininity into a narrative which would sell (161). Authors like Nesbit did not have to, and often were not able to, choose which side of feminism their works would be on — rather, they engaged with complex tensions within their works, so perhaps their novels could fit in with both. If Nesbit’s progressive message made it through to at least some readers, though, it was all worth it.

None of this project’s six authors were shy about their inclusion of heroines in their children’s texts — not the two men, nor the four women. Surely, they anticipated that their leading ladies would have an impact on their readers. Cashdan asserts, “Mrs Ewing knew the power of books when she wrote: ‘A wicked book is all the wickeder because it can never repent’” (220). But the Golden Age was shaped deeply by its own leading ladies, including Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, and Rossetti. Even considering that the *Alice* stories, widely regarded as some of the most iconic works of children’s fantasy in the English language, were written by a man, there would have been no Golden Age without the dedication of the women who were brave enough to seek publication. However, for these female authors to get to that point, they had to rely on their middle-class privilege.

### **Writing and Living the Female Experience: The Class Divide**

Gilbert and Gubar contextualize the society to which Victorian authors were releasing their work as “essentially male—devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world”

(67). However, in elaborating, they state that “the novel traditionally traces what patriarchal society has always thought of as a masculine pattern: the rise of a middle-class hero past dramatically depicted social and economic obstacles to a higher and more suitable position in the world” (67). In this sense, if a heroine’s journey were not explicitly out of the angelic role and into the ‘man’s world,’ it could very well have been to reach, maintain, or even surpass a middle-class setting. It is important to note that each of my six primary texts were produced by and for the middle class; some of the novels, mainly *The Princess and the Goblin*, *Speaking Likenesses*, *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers*, and *The Secret Garden* address class divides directly, while others, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Mrs. Overthrew’s Remembrances*, touch on the matter barely, if at all. In order to study the settings of these texts, it is worth it to describe the class situation from which “the Angel in the House” was born: the middle class, in which the Victorian woman was “mystified” in published literature (Langland 301).

In an article for the Journal of the Modern Language Association (*PMLA*), Elizabeth Langland explains the Victorian woman’s role in middle-class society as such: “The wife, the presiding hearth angel of Victorian social myth, actually performed a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived... Whereas husbands earned the money, wives had the important task of administering the funds to acquire or maintain social and political status” (290-1). This status was maintained by wives acting as socialites, hosting and making visits with other women in their circles<sup>23</sup>. Being a good host was of utmost importance, because “social status was marked not only on the woman’s person and in her behavior but in her sanctum and sanctuary, the Victorian home” (Langland 294). This meant

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<sup>23</sup> This practice is commonly described in literature from this time. Though none of this project’s primary texts depict calls among adults, a great example of these situations can be found in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899).

keeping a clean house and keeping the children in check while demonstrating social skills, a task which often fell not on the wife, but the servants.

According to Langland, middle-class households in Victorian England “by definition included at least one servant” (291); the wife kept them in check, but also used her help as another means of demonstrating her status. In *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers*, despite there being no wife in the Bastables’ home, the housekeeper, Eliza, illustrates this ideal. Though the Bastable family has run out of money — to the point that the children can no longer afford to go to school — Mr. Bastable still makes a keen effort to employ Eliza (Nesbit 1899). Her existence shows that he is holding onto his former wealth and working hard to maintain his middle-class image as he strives to get back on his feet. That being the case, since he is never home like a wife would be, Eliza rarely does her job and is largely absent from the novel. Oswald, who idolizes his mother, describes Eliza early in the novel as “a very forgetful girl,” adding, “She used to forget what she had spent money on, so that the change was never quite right” (16). Eliza’s near-uselessness could perhaps serve as a commentary by Nesbit on the perceived ineptitude of workers from lower classes — again, her borderline-satirization is often unclear, and her “unwitting stereotyp[ing] of the poor,” according to Smith, “is problematic” (156).

A more unconventional portrayal of a servant which demoralizes the lower class is seen in one particularly gruesome scene in *Alice’s Adventures*: the “Pig and Pepper” chapter. In this short stop on Alice’s journey, the reader not only meets the cruel Duchess, but her Cook.

According to Honig, the Cook is “the most interesting servant in Victorian fantasy:”

Like most of the adult female figures Carroll creates, she is violent and crazy. And like more grotesques, the figure of Cook is based on reality stretched to the point where it is hardly recognizable. Picture an inarticulate, much-abused cook in an upper-class English family. She is overworked, underpaid, and her mistress is an irascible eccentric... Cook may be crazy, but she is independent and effectual, traits that make her a successful working woman. (Honig 61)

Honig's point about the Cook's success permeating her craziness is poignant — it emphasizes



Alice, the Duchess, the baby, and the Cook, illustrated by John Tenniel (Carroll 1865; 104). Notice that the Cook has no face.

Carroll's depiction of the lower classes as hugely uncivilized, especially compared to the prim and proper Alice (Carroll 1865; 105). The Duchess does her part to keep the Cook in check, and although her visit with Alice is by no means a proper call, also continues to make points about playing croquet with the Queen, whom she prioritizes over Alice and her crying baby to show her own importance (106).

“Of course,” Langland writes, “many middle-class women did work; one maid of all work could not accomplish everything that needed to be done in a home. But ladies *pretended* they did no useful chores” (294; my emphasis). This adds to the spoken persona of a middle-class woman, like the Duchess' pompous reminders that she is friends with the Queen. *The Secret Garden's* Mary is a clear example of someone whose image of the middle class comes from hearsay and is then molded by her own experience: in India, she is often reminded of her riches, enabling her bad behavior. She does nothing for herself, barely moving except to display aggression: for example, “when we first meet Mary, she is beating and kicking the female servant who comes to check on her” (Dolan 211). When she moves to Misselthwaite, her class does not change — her uncle is wealthy and her house is filled with servants — but her responsibilities do. When Mary meets Martha, her maid, Martha is stunned to find a child who is unable to dress herself. Contrary to Carroll's writing of the Cook, though, Martha is a lower-class individual who is portrayed in a very positive light. Her existence, competence, and kindness is

imperative to the novel's plot; this is a huge contrast to Mary's mother, who neither exists (for the most part), nor is kind.

According to Langland, "The mid-Victorian [middle-class] husband depended on his wife to perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of the family's status" (291). Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, and Rossetti were all wives, and all shared responsibilities inside the home. None actively protested against their own vocations inside their houses — instead, they took to their written works to tell the stories of homes in which these norms were challenged. Knowing their novels, whether published in the periodical press or as bound volumes, would be read by middle-class children, they based their heroines within this setting, as well. However, in most of these texts, this 'mid-Victorian middle-class husband' was without a wife. In these cases, the authors begged the question: who does the wife's work?

### **Writing the Female: Mothers and Maternal Instinct**

In order to study how the established authors of the Golden Age portrayed girlhood in their writing, we must first study how they wrote the mothers. In each of these texts, there is a distinct lack of mother characters — at least, mothers to the main heroines themselves. Though *The Princess and the Goblin's* Mrs. Peterson (Curdie's mother) and *The Secret Garden's* Mrs. Sowerby (Dickon and Martha's mother) play prominent positive roles in the stories of Irene and Mary, respectively, neither could be described as being as radical as the younger girls who fight goblins and sneak into locked gardens. Despite having written rebellious girls into their stories, Golden Age authors were united in that they kept mothers more firmly planted within the idea of the Angel in the House, and thereby did not make them out to be role models for the younger heroines. "Clearly," Honig writes, "even children's fantasy, with all the extra leeway that writing

for children rather than adults and the mode of fantasy itself provided, dared not portray mothers as figures of power” (113).

Instead of joining in their daughters’ exploits, mothers (dead or alive) were used as examples of proper womanhood, quite the opposite of the examples set forth by the adventurous Alices and sneaky Marys of these tales. “All mothers are nice and good more or less,” MacDonald wrote in *The Princess and the Goblin*, “but Mrs Peterson was nice and good all *more* and no *less*” (1872; 91; emphasis in original). The most helpful mothers, Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Sowerby, were always confined to their homes, cooking for and doting on their children. Mrs. Sowerby also serves as a stark contrast to the unloving socialite Mrs. Lennox is inferred to have been. The only firm detail the reader is consistently reminded of regarding Mrs. Lennox is her superficial beauty, not her disposition or her lack of care for daughter. Mrs. Sowerby muses on this beauty which even she has heard about when she first meets the ‘quite contrary’ Mistress Mary: “It doesn’t stand to reason that a pretty woman could be th’ mother o’ such a fou’ [foul] little lass” (Burnett 332). Though these women never get in the way of the heroines’ adventures — Mrs. Sowerby even encourages Mary to go outside and buys her a skipping-rope, enabling her to literally break free from the house — they never themselves stood in the way of convention. It is difficult to imagine, for example, Mrs. Peterson charging at a horde of goblins alongside the King’s knights.

More often, though, mothers entered stories almost as ghosts: just here-and-there mentions of the beautiful women that once were. The most common means of eliminating mothers from the picture, at least within the bounds of my primary sources, was killing them off prior to the start of the novel. This is the case in *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers* and *Mrs. Overthway’s Remembrances*<sup>24</sup>; in *The Secret Garden*, Mary’s mother dies within the first

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<sup>24</sup> This is also the case for Maggie’s mother in *Speaking Likenesses*, but this has little to no impact on the story itself.

chapter, which triggers her move to Misselthwaite, and Conor's mother's death is central to the existence of the garden (Burnett). Never are these mothers, or any mother figures in the six books, written in a negative light — even Mrs. Lennox, who was famously snobbish and not at all close to Mary, is mourned. Gilbert and Gubar interpret the device of dead mothers to be a strategy of sainting conventional, “womanly” women: “When she becomes an *objet d'art* or a saint,” they explain, “it is the surrender of her self [sic]—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman's key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead” (Gilbert & Gubar 25).

This “sainting” also comes into play in *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances* regarding not Ida's mother (of whom we know nothing), but Mrs. Overtheway's. A great deal of the descriptions of childhood in Ewing's text are through Mrs. O's fireside stories to Ida — much tamer than Alice's dreams of Wonderland, but including a few shining moments of rebellion. These stories include Mrs. O's mother, grandmother, sister, family friends, and elderly neighbors — though her mother sits mostly at the forefront of female role models in these stories-within-a-story — all of whom are dead by the time Mrs. O relays their tales. In the second story she tells, titled “The Snoring Ghost,” Mrs. Overtheway's mother (through Mrs. O herself), tells her own mother that she thinks “innumerable girls struggle miserably in the practice of duty, from a radical ignorance of its principles, and that the earlier these are learnt, the smaller is the burden of regret one heaps together to oppress the future, and the sooner one finds that peace of mind which is not common even amongst the young, and should-be light-hearted” (Ewing 46). Obviously, Mrs. O's mother is cemented in nineteenth century ideals. Being long gone, this is



how she lives on through Mrs. O's storytelling, and how Ewing chooses to present her to her young readers — an Angel in the House.

Bilston asserts that “Maternal absences in fiction [...] and particularly maternal absences at the scene of reading, typically compel a heroine to generate new and palpably unorthodox narratives—about their reading, about their mothers, and about themselves” (1). The elusiveness of the Golden Age mother was not akin to the prominence of motherhood in Victorian England — when considering these novels' readership, one could assume that most children reading works such as *Alice* did, in fact, have fully-present mothers. However, without literal mothers within the fictions, readers could more easily imagine their own mothers as rebellious women themselves. “Carefully watchful mothers would keep their children away from rabbit holes, magic clocks, and such, preventing their adventures from ever taking place and therefore keeping the children from maturing through their adventurous confrontations” (Honig 25); since none of these characters are explicitly written, children (especially girls) could keep an open mind as to how their own mothers would react to their ‘unwomanly’ ventures into the nonfictional world. Even in non-fantastic tales such as *Treasure-Seekers*, the distinct lack of adults is what keeps the story going. Smith writes, “E. Nesbit usually insures free reign for the children's adventures by eliminating one or both parents from their midst” (160); in *Treasure-Seekers*, Mrs. Bastable is dead, Mr. Bastable is always preoccupied, and Eliza is nowhere to be found, so the children fend for themselves.

However, Bilston neglects a large presence in children's literature when making her point about “maternal” presence: the absence of literal mothers does not translate into an absence of maternal *figures*. In works belonging to the Golden Age, especially those I have chosen to study, there are three main types of maternal figures present who are not literal mothers to the heroines:

these are aunts, sisters, and governesses and maidservants. As previously touched on in describing the women in Mrs. Overthway's tales, any older female figure in a children's text can easily take on maternal roles in their dialogue, actions, and how the author decides to describe them. Mrs. Overthway is a prime example of an auntly figure: a character who, as Rosing writes, shares "neither a household nor a biological relationship [with the heroine]; they form their connection by acknowledging and bridging the distance that initially separates them" (149). Ewing's periodical being called *Aunt Judy's Magazine* also illustrates the idea of an aunt-niece relationship: "Aunt Judy" relays stories to her "nieces and nephews" (her readers), and is a figure that they can trust without being an imposing parental guide. *Speaking Likenesses*, almost mirroring *Mrs. Overthway's Remembrances* across the fantasy-fiction line, is also a novel made up of stories a loving aunt tells her young nieces<sup>25</sup>.

A prime example of a maternal relationship from a sister comes from Dora Bastable, and is especially apparent when directly comparing statements Nesbit poses about her versus her younger, more adventurous sibling, Alice. "The child was a major focus in Victorian times. Thought to be innocently wise, the figure of the child was almost worshipped," Honig writes. "So rather than presenting an ideal mother, an author may even depict the child as a mother—delineating the attributes of an ideal mother by the child's motherly behavior [...] and keeping the focus on the child" (38-9). Oswald, the narrator and second-oldest Bastable sibling, describes his older sister as "rather like grown-ups," and often makes a point to mention that she does not participate in their games (Nesbit 1899; 209). At one point within their adventures, Dora breaks down in tears over their deceased mother, confessing that she promised her that she would take care of her four young siblings (156). This leads an outpour of support from her siblings, leading Oswald — who, up until this point, described Dora in a standoffish fashion —

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<sup>25</sup> *Speaking Likenesses* and the unnamed aunt will be discussed more substantially in Chapter Two.

to “kiss[] Dora for some time. Because girls like it” (157); her behavior thus transformed from annoying to comforting for her siblings as a result of her claiming a maternal label.

Another, albeit much smaller, appearance of an elder sister is at the very end of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As Alice lays dreaming of defeating the Queen of Hearts and growing into an imposing giant, her older sister (herself still a child) muses on growing up. This is a significant change in tone and setting within Carroll’s nonsense world, and thereby makes a touching statement about maternal-like care:

...she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood; and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago; and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days. (Carroll 1865; 159)

Though still a child, this older sister’s short narrative is not unlike the tone of one of Mrs. Overthway’s remembrances: a touching retrospect in which she is already proud of Alice, just as Mrs. O envisions a better life for Ida after the child moves away. This maternal monologue also pointedly ends this nonsense fantasy tale on a realistic, domestic note — perhaps Carroll’s way of employing plausible deniability for Alice’s rebellious behavior, assuring adult readers that she would still grow up into a fine example of a lady.

Older sisters to heroines, like Alice Liddel’s and Dora (as Alice Bastable’s older sister), display the pressure placed on Victorian girls when the mother was not present. Oswald often compares Dora to a governess or mother figure, even admitting towards the end of the novel that “Dora is rather like grown-ups” (Nesbit 1899; 209). But their positions as *sisters* and not adults and/or mothers is crucial, because they are still young, and already feeling the effects of graduating from girlhood to womanhood. These characters, being in children’s books, exist for

those real older sisters who found themselves stepping into a maternal role, and remind the readers that they are still, in fact, children themselves. While they help make their younger sisters' lives more conventional to an ideal family, their own lives are out-of-balance with middle-class ideals; reading these older sisters could have been therapeutic for real older sisters, reminding them to play and remain children for as long as possible.

An interesting interaction between the maternal sister and the maternal maidservant is Burnett's Martha, a servant, an older sister to Dickon and many others, and a friend to Mary. Martha is responsible for Mary's care: she brings her food, dresses her, and is her first real taste of socialization. She herself is another unconventional feminine character, as she is not the most prim and proper maid. Frances Dolan explains in *Children's Literature*, "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" (212). Martha, therefore, has a commanding, yet positive influence which people in lower classes were not often written to have. Burnett makes this known by giving the character a thick Yorkshire accent, which she uses even around Mistress Mary to stay true to herself, but also to show Mary that they are friends. "If Martha had been a well-trained fine young lady's maid," Burnett writes, "she would have been more subservient and respectful and would have known that it was her business to brush hair, and button boots, and pick things up and lay them away" (35). Martha also acts as Mary's window to Mrs. Sowerby, Dickon, and Conor. If not for Martha, there would be no secret garden, and Mary would have remained 'quite contrary' in her uncle's home. Martha is Mary's age, an outlier when considering the age differences between other heroines and their maidservants and nurses. Irene's dear nurse Lottie in *The Princess and the Goblin*, for example, is presumed to be an adult.

Rather than acting as a catalyst to the heroine's journey, as Burnett chose to write Martha, MacDonald's Lottie is often put in her place in the narration: she may be a friend to Irene, but she aggressively attempts to put a stop to Irene's beliefs about the magic staircase, much to her dismay, and even gets herself in deep trouble with Irene's father when the two of them stay outside past dark (MacDonald 1872). The author's issue with Lottie is not just in her womanly standing — as also seen with Mrs. Peterson — but with her servant standing. “MacDonald's ultimate class slur comes when he tells us Nurse Lottie is ‘not a lady enough’ to understand that it is better for the Princess to kiss the simple miner boy Curdie than to break her word,” Honig asserts. “In her low-class way, Lottie cares more for appearances than true morality. She is also indiscreet, for she whispers about the Princess with the other servants” (Honig 60). Even in the end, when Lottie helps to save Irene in the fight against the goblins, MacDonald never allows her to fully be a heroine or confidant, or to surpass her angel-servant standing. However, given Irene's lack of a mother and friends and her faraway father, Lottie is a clear maternal figure, seen especially in the deep care she shows for her mistress.

The Bastables' Eliza also fits in this mold: she rarely appears in Nesbit's narrative, which adds to the air of dissatisfaction she carries. Her being out for a night puts the siblings in danger when a robber breaks into the home; her being inattentive allows them to go to town numerous times, unattended, for various money-making schemes. Though this enables them to have stories worth telling, it also makes a statement about how ‘useless’ society thought an unmotherly governess figure could be. This is not aided by her actual appearances in the dialogue, which are never favored by the kids. Oswald, as narrator, describes such a situation: “Eliza said, ‘Don't.’ I believe that's a word grown-ups use more than any other” (Nesbit 1899; 203).

In their womanly vocation, Victorian mothers' roles were primarily to teach their children: this included leading their daughters to being angels in the house by being an example themselves. The authors, conscious of creating rebellious heroines which defied this stereotype, still decided to keep this notion alive, though subtly, given the lack of literal mothers in their novels. Though some of these characters make more of an impression on the heroines and their readers than others, it is safe to say that none of them would have the thought, or the bravery, to "attempt the pen," setting them distinctly apart from the girls in question and the authors that built the Golden Age.

### Writing the Female: Monsters and Madness

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* does contain mention of one explicit mother: the abusive, jarring Duchess. Citing this, Honig explains that "The Duchess is a grotesque figure both in appearance and behavior. She is very ugly and utterly mad" (28). In her short scene, Alice witnesses the Duchess pepper her baby — which slowly turns into a pig — over and over as it cries and sneezes. Despite aggressively telling Alice "You don't know much [...] and that's a fact," the Duchess thrusts her child into Alice's arms so she may play croquet (Carroll 1865; 105). Although Alice does not know what to do with the pig-baby, she knows it is safer with her than with its grotesque mother, saying to herself, "If I don't take this child away with me, [...] they're sure to kill it in a day or two. Wouldn't it be murder to leave it behind?" (107).



Alice holding the pig-baby, illustrated by John Tenniel (Carroll 1865; 108).

This scene is exemplary of another commonly-written trope in Victorian fiction, even in the Golden Age: a mad or monstrous woman. Again, while this quality does not pertain to our heroines, the presence of a character like this is an interesting insight into an author's perception of the female, even despite bringing such a powerful heroine into existence. These monstrous women are presented in direct contrast with heroines and the reader's existing idea of how a woman should behave. Gilbert and Gubar elaborate on the significance of these ladies:

[T]he monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and thus represents both the author's power to allay "his" anxieties by calling their source bad names (witch, bitch, fiend, monster) and, simultaneously, the mysterious power of the character who refuses to stay in her textually ordained "place" and thus generates a story that "gets away" from its author. (28)

Carroll's Queen of Hearts also embodies this description, especially when compared to Alice, who at the time of their meeting is even a bit shrunken down in size. She constantly stomps around, yelling "Off with her head!" at the slightest hint of wrongdoing<sup>26</sup>, and keeping an eagle eye on her rigged game of croquet. It is revealed by the White Rabbit that she even ordered the execution of the Duchess; the Queen is thus so monstrous, she literally ousts the only other female example to take the title for herself (Carroll 1865; 124). Though Alice is gaining autonomy and bravery by this point, she is still a poised young lady, and the Queen's background antics only emphasize this quality of the titular adventurer.

Another monstrous woman within these texts — this time, more literally monstrous — is the Queen Goblin in MacDonald's *The Princess and the Goblin*, who, like the Queen of Hearts, proves to be the ultimate antagonist. The Queen Goblin is the leader of the cobs which terrorize the kingdom at night; these creatures are the reason Irene is not allowed to go outside past sunset,

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<sup>26</sup> Kelly notes that this was an allusion to a popular adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a play which featured one of the most monstrous human characters in literature at the time (123).

or to venture off alone. Though her husband and son are also nefarious in the underground



The Queen Goblin chasing Irene and Curdie, illustrated by Arthur Hughes (MacDonald 1872; 163).

tunnels, she — not unlike Mrs. Peterson within her family unit — is the brains behind the operation. When the goblins invade the castle, the knights intuitively attack the male fleet; only Curdie, who had been eavesdropping on the family, knows to target the Queen (MacDonald 1872). The Queen has a weakness which itself is not far from a feminine stereotype, despite belonging to a goblin: she wears stone shoes, and is the only goblin to do so, because if her feet are trod on, she becomes incapacitated.

Especially considering all the bounds which MacDonald sets up for Irene as a princess — for example, “a real princess cannot tell a lie... a real princess is never rude” (21) — a Queen being the most unwomanly woman imaginable makes a huge statement. Without explicitly saying so, MacDonald (and Carroll too, less overtly) is showing readers what Irene, a princess, could become if she veers from her royal path. The Queen of Goblins and the Queen of Hearts are examples of how *not* to act, rather than ambiguous maternal figures, and serve clear antagonist roles in their respective novels. The significance of including such vile women perhaps is an ominous reminder to young readers not to toe out of line; that while they may explore a rabbit hole or follow an invisible thread, they should still grow up into polite adults. Otherwise, these readers will grow into undesirable madwomen like the Queens, the Duchess, and the aforementioned Cook.

It is not insignificant that these characters were written by men, and that the other four female-authored novels I am studying do not include such overt examples of monstrous women.



Rossetti's does include an antagonistic queen — the “Birthday Queen” — but this character is a human, and a child, and therefore very unlike the former two male-written Queens. Though Carroll and MacDonald's heroines were iconic and inspired generations of children's heroines to come, their motivations for writing free, adventuring girls did not come from the same experiences as the likes of Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, and Rossetti. Briggs explains that women writers in the Golden Age “felt they must prove themselves to be serious and persuade others to take them seriously, and this mood of seriousness was reflected in what they wrote” (222). This ‘seriousness’ could be in the less-literal adventures in the works of fiction, the inclusion of a surrogate storyteller — *Speaking Likenesses*' aunt, *Treasure-Seekers*' Oswald, and Mrs. Overthway — rather than a voice-of-God narrator, which MacDonald in particular loved to draw attention to (Thacker 12). While some researchers make allowances for these male authors, such as Honig's point to mention Carroll's upbringing in a largely-female household making him thoughtful, patient, and “interest[ed] in tiny things,” their male privilege cannot be erased (30). As this study of Golden Age work continues, it is important to keep this fundamental difference in mind.

## **Conclusion**

The final characteristic of a Golden Age novel which heavily influences its portrayal of heroic young girls is its genre. Both fantasy versus fiction works which featured heroines were small rebellions at the end of the day, but the bounds to which they could allow their characters to adventure were set by either the presence, or the lack of, magic. Honig explains, “having a heroine in a fantasy presented good opportunities for the inclusion of a feminist message if the writer were only bold enough and skillful enough. And, in spite of the image of the little girl as a

miniature Angel in the House, she still shared in the very positive Victorian image of the wise child” (72). Nesbit, as previously stated, was a tamer female author, and most of the Bastables’ adventures were within the bounds of home. Carroll’s Alice, on the other hand, is plunged down the rabbit hole to a universe where she is the only little girl; she grows and shrinks, speaks with animals, and wins a court case arguing against a pack of cards. In fantasy novels like this, it would not be possible for a heroine to be bound to the home like those in fiction — so, at the surface, it seems that fantasy novels were inherently more radical.

However, this may not be the case. Burnett’s novel especially is a very interesting case of a work of fiction which toes the line of including a magical world — the characters, Mary included, even start to believe in “Magic” by the end (Burnett). On the other side of the coin, *Speaking Likenesses* is told, like *Mrs. Overtheway*, through stories-within-stories, which does technically keep it within the bounds of the Angel’s house, despite the looming presence of Nowhere. By first studying the ways in which these now-contextualized authors wrote their heroines within the categories of fantasy versus fiction, conclusions about Victorian children’s fantasy, fiction, and the femininity in the Golden Age as a whole can be drawn, and these stories may all be connected. Magic is not shut out of fiction, nor is the home from fantasy.

Honig writes that “children’s fantasies can depict honestly those elemental feelings without resorting to such images because fantasy is so close to madness” (109). In this sense, fantasy novels should have been harder for readers and parents to swallow, and such nonsense as *Alice’s Adventures* should not have fared so well. But, when the Cheshire Cat tells Alice “We’re all mad here,” what does he mean by “mad” (Carroll 1865; 109)? This is not the “mad” which is synonymous with “monstrous,” like the mad Queens; nor does it pertain to the emotion “mad,” which Burnett’s story illustrates fading from her heroine Mary. Honig goes on to explain that “if

it is madness that allows us to see a girl's soul as it really is—bold and heroic—then it is a fine madness indeed, and one that leaves the reader ever grateful” (109). This is the madness which tempted the four female authors I am studying, and several others who pioneered the Victorian era of literature, to “attempt the pen —” and therefore, it is a madness worth having.

## Chapter Two

### Labels Prove Inadequate: the Fantasy Heroines of the Golden Age

Come sit round me, my dear little girls, and I will tell you a story. Each of you bring her sewing, and let Ella take pencils and colour-box, and try to finish some one drawing of the many she has begun. What Maude! pouting over that nice clean white stocking because it wants a darn? Put away your pout and pull out your needle, my dear; for pouts make a sad beginning to my story. And yet not an inappropriate beginning, as some of you may notice as I go on. Silence! Attention! All eyes on occupations, not on me lest I should feel shy! Now I start my knitting and my story together.

— Christina Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*

## Introduction

The Golden Age of Children's Literature is most famous for its journeys into dream worlds via the likes of goblins' tunnels, hidden staircases, dark forests, cuckoo clocks, and, of course, rabbit holes. The rise of the fantasy genre, which in decades prior was deemed unsuitable for proper, polite children, is often marked as having been incited by the 1865 publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, a truly unique work of nonsensical fiction led by a brave young heroine. The decades following the *Alice* novels hosted a surge of new children's stories taking place in mythical worlds, full of magic and adventure; this collective body of work published in the late nineteenth century not only stood out because of its fantastical qualities, but because of the young girls who overwhelmingly carried its plots. Though these novels were far from realistic, their authors followed the precedent Carroll set and hid notes of didacticism in their text for child readers to uncover and apply to their own lives. The heroines of the books were thus not only led the way through fantasy worlds, but also into a more progressive, open-minded future which child readers, once grown-up, would create.

The three works of fantasy I have chosen to study closely — *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872), and *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) — all feature female heroines who venture out on their own journeys into magical and unfamiliar territories, ultimately allowing their young female readers to fantasize about going on their own miraculous adventures and growing into strong, independent women alongside them. Standing in stark contrast to realist works such as Marianne Faringham's *Girlhood*, in which morals were spelled out more plainly, this message could exist because of the genre's plausible deniability: the scapegoat idea that the world the heroines travelled to, the creatures they met, and the lessons they learned, were obviously unreal and confined to dreams. The settings in which fantasy

narratives are placed are “always ultimately contained in a realm (like Alice’s Wonderland) that is clearly differentiated from the real world,” writes Andrea Kaston for the *Journal of Narrative Theory*. “For the Victorians, this differentiation [...] comfortably upheld social norms: stories of children facing difficulties beyond their control, or of girls acting on their own authority, for example, could thus be marked as imaginary and *therefore not threatening to the status quo*” (313; my emphasis). These settings, embellished with talking animals, spirit visitations, and magic, enabled heroines to be as daring, and even as defiant as a boy hero, because of their clear impossibility. The real girls — the readers — remained in their houses, well within social norms, presumably believing that their only path to Wonderland was falling asleep.

However, Carroll, MacDonald, and Rossetti were well aware of this genred constraint, and all used it to their advantage in some capacity. Fantasy realms also opened the door to a greater range of symbols that the authors could use to make and mask their morals: talking white rabbits, goblin shoes, and children made of slime, for example. Although these elements were obviously figments of imagination, the meaning which readers made from them left an entirely real and long-lasting impression on their growing minds. Writes Ruth Y. Jenkins for *The Lion and the Unicorn*, “Literature written for and read by children and adolescents, then, provides especially powerful opportunities for exploring the relationship between cultural scripts and the abject energies that threaten to subvert them” (68). In addition to the sheer inventiveness of Wonderland, this method of circulating cultural commentary via nonsense is a large part of what made Carroll’s stories so popular for other writers to adapt throughout history, and the fantasy genre so suddenly popular to add to in the Golden Age. Through the lens of fantasy, writers could now address matters outside the girl’s own home, because, of course, the heroine was meant to dream the entire affair — meaning, she never really left.

Each work pointedly deals with themes of class, though all books were published in full, illustrated volumes and only accessible to those middle-to-upper class families who could afford them<sup>27</sup>. Alice’s “educated speech, dress, and surroundings,” Richard Kelly asserts, “all testify to her upper-class character. She is even disturbed when put in the position of a servant when the White Rabbit calls her Mary Ann and demands she fetch his gloves” (13). MacDonald’s Irene is herself a princess, though juxtaposed with Curdie, a miner’s son whose family has very little; Rossetti’s Flora and Edith are depicted as coming from large homes with servants and lavish dinners waiting for them, though her penultimate tale is that of the specifically-lower-class Maggie. Additionally, all but one of these five leading girls is written with a full range of behaviors: the comfortable, polite young lady literature was accustomed to promoting; an ungrateful, unforgiving ball of young angst; a girl sulking so much in her own self pity that she cries herself a river; and, of course, the brave young heroine who leads the story to its resolution. The only heroine without an emotional range is Maggie, who is also the only heroine who is specifically lower-class — in making this clear juxtaposition between her and the previous two girls, Flora and Edith, Rossetti suggests the emotional freedom is predicated on financial ease. Maggie, though, defies stereotypes, and is braver and kinder than her richer counterparts, being the only one of Rossetti’s girls to succeed in her task. Whereas previous literature had not featured such emotional range in a competent, desirable female protagonist, children’s fantasy suddenly showed readers girls who acted more like themselves, daring to dream.

Much of Kelly’s introduction to *Alice* is based on his claim that “Unlike the traditional Victorian children’s story, there is no over-arching [sic] moral to shape Alice’s experiences in Wonderland... *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was refreshingly anti-didactic” (13-4).

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<sup>27</sup> *The Princess and the Goblin* was first serialized with illustrations in *Good Words for the Young* from November 1870 to June 1871, then published as a full volume in 1872 (*Wrexham Weekly Advertiser*). MacDonald was the editor of this periodical.

However, I disagree greatly with this statement: what was revolutionary about *Alice*, and all fantasy literature, was its *indirect*, rather than *nonexistent* didacticism. These stories, though unreal and sometimes purposefully confusing (see all of Alice's nonsense poetry even adults cannot comprehend — which was the point), pioneered new ways of teaching readers lessons by forcing the children to unearth them themselves. The added layer of a brave female protagonist increased their impact; after all, the protagonist of a children's text, especially if their story ends happily, serves as a role model to readers. In her article “‘All sorts of pitfalls and surprises’: Competing Views of Idealized Girlhood in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books,” Jennifer Geer argues that “Alice's adventures allow readers of all ages to indulge their fantasies of rebelling against unjust authority figures while defining themselves as children who only want to play in a garden and impress others” (11). Girls were safe to devour Alice's adventures — and parents, safe to feed them to their children — because of the veil in which the fantasy genre tinted these stories, their settings, their characters, and, seemingly, their morals. As this new wave caught on in the literary mainstream, the Golden Age of Children's Literature began, and no heroine born in a children's text — fiction or fantasy — would ever be quite as confined to her home as she was before. In order to analyze the turning point of girlhood in Victorian children's literature as a whole, it is necessary to begin with the genre that made writing positive female rebellion possible: a genre which, despite its surface-level make-believe fun and looming disconnect from reality, was very much didactic.

### **The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature**

When using literature as a mode to examine a moment in history, it is perhaps even more telling to look to the least-realistic stories to unmask the truths which sit behind their metaphors.



Realistic fiction depicted a more idealized version of reality because of how similar it was to the lives of its readers. Within the context of fantasy, however, writers quickly found that they could add as much cultural criticism, or offer morals as weighty as they wanted, as long as they took the form of a talking animal, a “cob” creature, or a land explicitly called “Nowhere.” Jenkins praises works like Carroll’s, MacDonald’s, and Rossetti’s, as “remarkable texts” which “offer insight into the tensions of Victorian culture as well as opportunities for readers to revel in differing visions and spaces,” allowing growing readers to dream of the new realities they would build in their coming adulthood (84). Though early fantasy was met with skepticism from reviewers and writers alike, once the flame caught, inspiration flourished. Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher emphasize when introducing iconic works of Victorian fantasy that “the wild magic of fairy tales, so guardedly approached even by the finest of the didacticists who dominated earlier juvenile literature, now seemed to license a new generation of writers as well as readers to be deviant, angry, even violent or satirical” (3). Clearly, this genre was turning a new page.

Before proceeding, it is important to note the difference between the genres of ‘fantasy’ and ‘fairy tale.’ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the word “fantasy” was associated with a literary genre<sup>28</sup>, while the genre “fairy tale” dates back to 1635<sup>29</sup>, and thus would have been how these authors characterized their own works (*OED Online*). Nowadays, scholars often use the terms interchangeably: Geer, for example, jointly defines them, writing, “fairy tales, a category that in nineteenth-century usage includes literary and traditional tales, nonsense, and what we would now call fantasy fiction” (1-2). However, for the purposes of this research, I am sticking only with ‘fantasy,’ as the

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<sup>28</sup> The first-cited instance of this came from the 1949 book title “The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction.”

<sup>29</sup> This first observed use of “Fayrie tale” relates the genre to something like a folktale, fable, or “Sphinx’s riddle.”

connotations of ‘fairy tale’ feel too dated, infantile, and traditional for the works which I am studying. The term ‘fairy tale’ is often first associated with the Brothers Grimm<sup>30</sup>, who published their iconic body of work at the beginning of the nineteenth century; though in German, their stories continue to influence children’s media to this day, and were well-known in English during the Golden Age. At Christmastime in 1874, for example, the *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote of the newest edition that “a more acceptable Christmas gift for a *boy* cannot easily be found” (13; my emphasis). Though fairy tales like the Brothers’ do share many common characteristics with fantasies — magic, personified animals and objects, and daring adventures, for example — they lack the compelling commentary or cultural relevance at the root of the latter. Kaston elaborates:

Fairy tales are of imaginary worlds that readers are not supposed to assume represent reality as they know it. The fantastic, on the other hand, is characterized by Tzvetan Todorov as producing, “the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the law of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. The concept of the fantastic is therefore to be defined in relation to those of the real and the imaginary.” (307)

“Fairy tales,” by this definition, cannot carry the subversive lessons which works published in the Golden Age are now known for; “fantasy,” is thus the winning label.

MacDonald himself even disagreed with the implications of the genre “fairy tale,” since it was too closely related to “fairy story.” He wrote of this frustration in an essay aimed at adults, saying, “That we have in English no word corresponding to the German *Märchen*, drives us to use the word *Fairy tale*, regardless of the fact that the tale may have nothing to do with any sort of fairy” (1893). For him, and a less-literal name for the genre, like what would later be called fantasy, made more sense. The root of any given fantasy is the incarnation of one’s *fantasizing*:

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<sup>30</sup> More specifically, Jacob L. K. Grimm and Wilhelm C. Grimm, two brothers who published the German volume *Children’s and Household Tales* (1812), a collection of 86 stories (growing to over 200 in subsequent editions) which was later popularized as *Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. For more on the brothers and their work, I recommend referring to Jack Zipes’ collection of research.

their dreams come to fruition and briefly mingling with their real-world consciousness. This concept is illustrated in Alice Liddel’s realization that, “When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!” if we replace “fairy tales” with “fantasies:” Alice was well aware of Wonderland being a magical realm, and her experience of it was framed by her real-world Victorian mannerisms (Carroll 1865; 86-7). If this were a fairy tale, Alice would not acknowledge Wonderland’s fictitiousness, nor reference her regular life in comparison, and thus no cultural commentary would stem from her story. In hindsight, then, and in viewing these works through this era-defining lens, I see *Alice*, *The Princess and the Curdie*, and *Speaking Likenesses* strictly as works of fantasy, not fairy tales<sup>31</sup>.

Even MacDonald’s Irene, who has always lived within the fantasy kingdom which she explores (in contrast to Wonderland and Nowhere), is fascinated by the sudden magic in her midst: all her life she has been sheltered inside, only going outdoors in the daytime with an adult beside her, and so at the start of the novel she is unaware that she lives in a fantasy (MacDonald 1872). Thus, the staircase leading to her grandmother’s tower and the caverns of the goblins are two examples of the new “worlds” which she is thrust into unprepared.



Irene discovering the hidden staircase, illustrated by Arthur Hughes (MacDonald 1872; 80).

Irene’s interactions with the fantasy realm, like Alice’s, Flora’s, Edith’s, and Maggie’s, is separate from her conception of “reality” — if *Princess* were a fairy tale, though, she would have been aware of this magic prior to the novel’s events. Edith is another interesting case, as she is unperturbed by the animals that speak to her; however, the aunt-narrator makes their obscurity clear to her listeners and readers, explaining, “Edith was so

<sup>31</sup> However, for the purpose of brevity, when quoting scholarly works or primary source reviews, I will refrain from changing the authors’ choice to employ the term “fairy tale” if they choose to do so.

thoroughly preoccupied by her troubles as to have very little room left in her mind for surprise,” and thus did not flinch at pigeons and squirrels offering her advice (Rossetti 63). In making clear that Edith was not used to being spoken to by animals, Rossetti identifies Edith’s story as a fantasy, not a fairy tale — for, if this were a fairy tale, she would be used to talking woodland creatures, and this explanation would not be necessary. Each of these works made clear their separation from fairy tales, in which fantasy is reality, in their own ways. That being said, the precedent for separating fantasy heroines from the laws of nature was set when young Alice Liddel fell down a rabbit hole and into Wonderland in 1865.

Though *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* was not the first work of children’s fantasy to ever grace the published page, something about the short novel caused a stir throughout Victorian England, and soon, the world; Jenkins accentuates the novel’s importance especially, writing, “*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*<sup>32</sup> have long been recognized as turning points in children’s literature and Carroll regarded as the greatest writer from the golden age of children’s literature” (Jenkins 79). Published just in time for Christmas 1865, Carroll’s novel was met with rave reviews. In the December 12, 1865 edition of the English book periodical *The Bookseller*, an anonymous reviewer claimed, “a more original fairy tale—and original fairy tales are by no means common now-a-days—it has not lately been our good fortune to read” (*Bookseller*). The rarer negative reviews were mostly focused on some content being too confusing or serious for children: for instance, *The Athenaeum* wrote on December 16, 1865, “we fancy that any real child might be more puzzled than enchanted by this stuff, over-wrought story,” and *The Times* called it “a little bit too clever ever here and there” in 1868 (*Athenaeum, Times*). Whether or not their comments regarding the content were true, the

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<sup>32</sup> Though *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* is another iconic work of children’s fantasy from the Golden Age, for the purposes of this paper, I will focus mainly on its predecessor.

*Athenaeum* reviewers were proven wrong by the book's sales, and subsequent impact on children's literature in the years to come.

In her examination of mid-Victorian children's novels, the American psychologist Ravenna Helson calls *Alice's* publishing "a revolutionary event because it brought the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake into children's books" (72). Although this takes the view that *Alice* was a departure from moralistic children's literature — a stance I disagree with — Helson's use of the adjective "revolutionary" and the emphasis on the fantastical, dreamlike story (the likes of which children up until this point had never experienced outside of their own imaginations) is paramount. Moreover, *Alice* being an *event* rather than merely a novel is an important perspective when relating it to other mid-Victorian children's texts of either fantasy or fiction. The novel, and especially the main heroine herself, worked in the public sphere better than any female-led children's text had before. It is notable that in all the primary reviews of *Alice* I found from 1865 and 1866, it was never once labelled as a "girls' book,"<sup>33</sup> and it was never suggested that boys were not included in its audience; in fact, many reviews pointed to the appeal it held to adults, as well. The *Times*, for example, ended its blurb by stating that *Alice* would even delight "those who have, unfortunately, passed the years of wondering" (*Times*).

The curiosities in Carroll's book — the linguistic play, the nonsense poetry, the mystifying characters — are abundant, but its most significant trait was its heroine. From the very beginning, the *Alice* stories were dedicated to Alice Liddel, a young girl whom Carroll knew personally, and her sisters (Kelly); not her parents, nor any budding adults, but a seven-year-old child, who he adored. Apart from her gender, Alice's age and general smallness are crucial to the book's events and to how it was received and further influenced the industry.

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<sup>33</sup> Remember, an 1874 review of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* from *The Pall Mall Gazette* labelled these magical adventures as "boy" stories despite their inclusion of women and girls. See pp. 56.

Lessons and morals which could never appropriately reach the minds of growing girls in previous years were now brought into the home via this newfound genre: the overtly-unrealistic veil that was a fantasy setting. Once Carroll brought this way of writing for children to the mainstream, these lessons which authors sent children — girls in particular — had the means to become bolder. Kelly puts it plain and simple: “With *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Carroll created a new Victorian child heroine” (13).

The book’s popularity with child readers, though, was not necessarily shared by the female writers who came across it. Notably, Christina Rossetti — herself a family friend of Dodgson, who even gifted an inscribed copy of *Alice* to her (Knoepflmacher 305) — wrote to Carroll about the masculinity she found Alice to come into conflict with, rather than praising the inclusion of the heroine or the author’s wild imagination. In his standalone article about Rossetti and Carroll’s relationship for *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, U. C. Knoepflmacher examines her short thank-you letter to Carroll in which she highlighted “that conversational rabbit, that endearing puppy, that very sparkling dormouse, [...] the hatter... and the March hare”:

...she fails, significantly enough, to refer to the character of Alice herself, or, for that matter, to mention the book’s title. Instead, she chooses to dwell on her reaction to several of the male creatures Alice meets in Wonderland, creatures that she appears to recognize as agents of Carroll’s own ambivalence towards his female dream-child. (305-6)

Knowing Dodgson personally and, as is inferred in Knoepflmacher’s piece, having been privy to a bit of his “powerful blend of gentleness and sadism” and attraction to the real Alice Liddell in particular, Rossetti was not sold by the story which wrote Carroll’s place in history (Knoepflmacher 301). She perceived him just like the subject of her sonnet “In an Artist’s Studio,” a faceless male artist who creates “a nameless girl in freshest summer-greens, / A saint, an angel,” only to “feed[] upon her face by day and night,” an image which evokes a harmful

male gaze (qtd. in Knoepfmacher 299). Knoepfmacher asserts that Rossetti was not the only female author to feel this way during the *Alice* event, or to act on her disapproval of the narrative, writing, “It thus devolved upon other Victorian women writers to *reclaim* the form of [fantasy] that Lewis Carroll had feminized and so triumphantly appropriated to fill his dream and hold it true” (302; my emphasis). Thus, as an act of rebellion, *Speaking Likenesses* and all of its references to *Alice*, including heroines actually inspired by a firsthand female experience (Rossetti’s own), was born.

### **Hidden Didacticism: the Nonsensical and the Unhappy**

In its 1866 review of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Sunderland Herald* predicted that the novel would be “a great favourite with children” due to its apparent lack of didacticism, writing:

It has this advantage, that it has no moral, and that it does not teach anything. It is, in fact, pure sugar throughout, and is without any of that bitter foundation of fact which some people imagine ought to be at the bottom of all children’s books. It is certainly nonsense from beginning to end, but it is just that nonsense which no one but a clever man could have written. (*Sunderland Herald*)

This anonymous reviewer thus equated Carroll’s signature “nonsense” genre to lacking any “bitter foundation of fact,” or lessons that children were to take away from reading the text; in their eyes, *Alice*, and other works of children’s fantasy, fairy tales, and nonsense tales, included no applicable meaning whatsoever, which awarded the authors merit. However, this nonsense was not an indicator of the story having no morals — in fact, it was an indirect way of writing them in. Readers of pre-Golden Age fiction were used to lessons being plainly out in the open. With fantasy, though, their own minds had to fill in the gaps: this taking more mental effort on the reader’s part to decode and contextualize from nonsense to moral, fantasy lessons were more

individually-applicable and pointed than simple realistic ones, making these stories *more* didactic, not less, as long as the reader stayed engaged.

George MacDonald famously rebuked claims like *The Sunderland Herald's* in his 1893 essay "The Fantastic Imagination." Established at this point as a hugely important figure in mid-Victorian children's literature — and having acted as a literary mentor to Mr. Dodgson — MacDonald published this essay for the parents of his young readers, those middle-class adults who would have read book reviews in popular periodicals. Answering the question, "You write as if the fairytale were a thing of importance: must it have meaning?" MacDonald asserts that even nonsense "cannot help having some meaning" (1893). Sensing that this claim could cause concern in parents — the adults unable to decipher said meaning and thus not being able to explain it to their children, for example, or the children finding a meaning which the author had not intended — MacDonald's "The Fantastic Imagination" explains literature as if it were music, and nonsense as if it were "broken," waiting for the readers to tune it to their ears. The author calmly elaborates:

The true fairytale [sic] is, to my mind, very like the sonata. We all know that a sonata means something; and where there is the faculty of talking with suitable vagueness, and choosing metaphor sufficiently loose, mind may approach mind, in the interpretation of a sonata, with the result of a more or less contenting consciousness of sympathy. [...] The best way with music, I imagine, is not to bring the forces of our intellect to bear upon it, but to be still and let it work on that part of us for whose sake it exists. (MacDonald 1893)

If a reader cannot decipher the hidden didacticism in a fantasy text, MacDonald asserts that they should not stress over it: rather, they should "be still," and perhaps it will sort itself out in time. Though everything holds meaning, not everything is meant to be understood so intellectually. The beauty of fantasy is the ambiguousness of the setting, characters, and plot: rather than regular events unfolding in a girl's own home, incredible things occur in impossible places. If



nothing in the novel could possibly happen to its readers, their minds would have to work to transform the passages into images which they could relate to. Given the endless possibilities which symbol-heavy settings like Wonderland offer, these books appeal to a broader audience of young imaginations. MacDonald ends his essay by musing on such literary magic children's fantasy produces, writing, "If any strain of my 'broken music' make a child's eyes flash, or his mother's grow for a moment dim, my labour will not have been in vain" (1893).

*Speaking Likenesses*, too, carries lessons for its readers while presenting impossible happenings. In stark contrast to the many whimsical children's books produced in and following the Golden Age, however, *Speaking Likenesses* garnered much attention because of the distinctly-unhappy subject matter Rossetti employed to get her points across. The novel, really a set of three short stories, was not hugely popular when it was published, even while sitting on the 1874 list of Christmas gift books (*John Bull*). From the start, it seemed that Rossetti was set up for a hit: two years prior, she published a successful children's text, entitled *Sing-Song: a Nursery Rhyme Book*, to positive reviews. Her additional national recognition as a poet and pairing with the known illustrator Arthur Hughes, who also collaborated with Rossetti on *Sing-Song*<sup>34</sup>, meant *Speaking Likenesses* anticipated a positive reception once released. The reviews, however, were overwhelmingly negative. The well-read critic John Ruskin, in considering a large stack of Christmas books he was sent early in the season, wrote to a friend that "The *worst* I consider Christina Rossetti's. I've kept that for the mere wonder of it: how could she or Arthur Hughes sink so low after their pretty nursery rhymes?" (qtd. in Kaston 322; emphasis in original). *The Pall Mall Gazette* likened the book to *Alice* not because of its allusions to Carroll's work, but because of its complex nonsense. "'Speaking Likenesses'

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes notably also worked with George MacDonald on *The Princess and the Goblin*'s serialized and full-volume version. His illustrations in both *Sing-Song* and *Princess* garnered positive reviews.

(Macmillan and Co.) contains several strange stories teaching good lessons,” the reviewer wrote, “but it is to be feared it is sometimes above a child’s comprehension in design, and it is written with a choice of words unfamiliar to the ears of little people” (13).

*Speaking Likenesses*, lacking the customary wonderment and beauty of children’s fantasy works — employing, for instance, a dark, threatening forest called Nowhere as its setting as opposed to Princess Irene’s ornate castle or Alice’s bountiful Wonderland — is often cited as



A particularly-disturbing illustration from *Speaking Likenesses*, “Flora and the Children in the Enchanted Room,” illustrated by Arthur Hughes (Rossetti 29).

Rossetti’s way of accomplishing two literary goals.

The first was to rebel against the still-narrow area that woman writers were allowed to occupy in the publishing sphere and that woman characters were allowed to occupy in the emotional sphere; second, to teach her young readers lessons by using Carrollian fantasy symbolism, but in a poignantly-unhappy, non-wonderous tone and setting. Auerbach and Knoepfmacher observe that “Christina Rossetti found in children’s literature a perverse release from the cheerfulness demanded of good women,” and capitalized on this; knowing her readers, like her characters, would be young girls, she wrote this dark

text to teach them early that “To be good is to be happy, but to be happy is impossible”

(Auerbach & Knoepfmacher 317). The failures of her first two heroines, Flora and Edith, are a departure from the hopefulness which the presence of bold heroines instilled in readers. Instead of showing them what good they could potentially do in the world, these stories dispirited

excited girl readers and reminded them what bad things waited for them outside their Victorian homes. Though this is incredibly bleak, something so jarring as *Speaking Likenesses* carried the possibility that readers would be shocked by it in a way which would motivate them to create change in society, just as Flora changes her behavior once waking from the nightmare that was her journey to Nowhere.

Adding to the heavy effect which Rossetti's text meant to leave on readers was its inclusion of elements of both fantasy and conventional realistic fiction. *The Pall Mall Gazette* was not alone in admitting to *Speaking Likenesses*' overt inclusion of morals, despite it being related closely with *Alice* and other well-known works of children's fantasy which were considered non-didactic. Kaston points to this dualism as one of *Speaking Likenesses*' most unique features, explaining, "*Speaking Likenesses* partakes of both of the standard Victorian genres of children's fiction—didactic realism and fairy tale... positioning of *Speaking Likenesses* on the boundary between these genres... resisting the standard separation of imagination and reality" (307). So, Rossetti's harrowing adventures keep the relatable-via-imagination aspect of fantasy which MacDonald emphasized, while illustrating the effects of "the very real threats of hunger, cold, loneliness, the failure to fulfill gendered expectations, and much more" (Kaston 320-1). Perhaps it was this overt reference to reality, unique for a work so often related to *Alice*, which struck a dissonant chord of broken music with adult reviewers and parents. Alice Liddel may not have been a perfect lady by any means, but such undesirable events as forest children abusing young ladies or a boy with a giant mouth attempting to rob a little girl was even further lost from convention, despite the morals of these stories "confront[ing] some of the hardships of growing up female in Victorian England" which the readers would ultimately discover for

themselves (326). *Speaking Likenesses* may have teetered on the line between fantasy and reality a bit too much to be widely circulated and praised.

Citing the *Times Literary Supplement*'s 1959 review of *Speaking Likenesses* which labelled it a “‘particularly revolting’ text for children,” Anna Despotopoulou writes that the story is “more frightening than playful, its inventiveness more nightmarish than comforting” (415). Despite Rossetti’s clear and known talent with the pen and the few existing positive reviews of her book<sup>35</sup>, *Speaking Likenesses*’ reception paled in comparison to *Alice* and the *Princess* books and their more appealing positive imagery; however, the lack of reprints does not mean that Rossetti failed in what she set out to do by writing these three stories. Despotopoulou writes that “Rossetti wanted her Victorian readers to be sure to note that hers was indeed an imitation of the Alice books,” calling Flora’s, Edith’s, and Maggie’s stories “anti-fairy tales” (316). This situates Rossetti’s *Nowhere* as an anti-Wonderland — and readers of *Alice* would know that the opposite of Wonderland was, and is, real life. Using this dichotomy of genres and an unhappy tone, Rossetti sent a clear message about reality with her fantasy setting: that there was work that needed to be done. She even included this lesson explicitly, when the aunt relates Flora’s experience in the “Land of Nowhere” to what she calls the “Land of Somewhere” to tell her nieces to apply this unhappy story to their own lives, saying, “Look at home, children” (36).

### **A Narrow Escape from Britain: Getting Lost in the Setting**

All five of these heroines’ journeys are motivated, at least in part, by the girls being lost in new places: their attempts to find themselves, and to decode their fantasy settings, are what built them into the strong heroines which made strong impacts on readers. Wonderland,

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<sup>35</sup> London’s *Daily News* wrote that “the adventures of little Flora on her eighth birthday are very pleasant reading,” and attested that it would have never been written if not for *Alice*. See the *Daily News* issue 8911, 16 Nov. 1874, page 2.

Nowhere, and Princess Irene's unnamed domain (which I will hereby refer to as the Kingdom), stood out to readers in their unique features and inhabitants; the strong individuality of these places amongst standard fiction books made settings a pillar in the emerging children's fantasy genre. However, even far-off lands that were home to the likes of talking playing cards, barefoot goblins, and the Mouth-Boy<sup>36</sup> had to evoke a few images which children could relate to their own Britain. These hints at reality gave the fantastic elements a greater impact on the young readers, conjuring up images of Wonderland while sitting in their mundane homes or gardens. Writes Kaston, Golden Age fantasy works "represented worlds just enough like England to be recognizable (e.g. monarchies) but peopled with folks who were delightfully free from human limitations" (312). This enabled the heroines to act boldly while keeping them realistic enough so girl readers could easily put themselves in their shoes. Establishing these settings for the fantasy tales was crucial in setting up their central conflicts, which are all centered on the heroines getting themselves physically lost, thus constituting a fantastic exploration through their settings to get home. Without these journeys, the five girls in question could not be fantasy heroines: and without these settings, they could not embark on these journeys.

The plots of each of these three fantasy novels focused on some variation of a young heroine restoring law and order to either her own life or the land itself, the law and order having been disrupted by some greater magical happening. Even throughout "these imaginative places, cultural identity and value remain fluid," especially because each of the five heroines began their tales in civilized society (Jenkins 74). In fact, out of these five heroines, only Irene did not begin her tale in literal reality. In her realm, the goblins and the possibility of her grandmother's tower always existed; but in her sheltered worldview, in which she is confined to her castle and only allowed to be outside with her nurse during daytime (non-goblin hours), no such magic could

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<sup>36</sup> See pp. 82 for Hughes' illustration of the Mouth-Boy.

have possibly been real. Alice's story starts in her garden with her sister, Flora's and Edith's in their bustling upper-middle-class homes while a meal is being prepared, and Maggie's in her grandmother's shop. These beginnings nearly parallel those from this project's selection of fiction: Burnett's Mary starts sitting in the garden at her large estate in India, Ewing's Ida holed up in her room, and Nesbit's Bastables playing in their backyard. The level playing field which most Golden Age literature started signified that just as the fantasy settings mysteriously revealed themselves to children who searched for them, the readers could perhaps go discover a magical world for themselves.

This is where this genre of stories starts to diverge from general fiction. None of these magical settings are found on purpose: the girls all leave their homes intentionally, but their endpoints are accidental, unknown, and require quite an effort to escape. The heroines realize this with varying degrees of nonchalance. On the subtler end of that spectrum is Edith, who barely notices the space she occupies is magical at all because she is distracted by her own despair. When she ultimately fails in her quest to make tea, she sits and cries until someone from her home finds her. Edith being what Auerbach and Knoepflmacher call a "nonheroine of a nonstory," this chapter of *Speaking Likenesses*, a buffer between Flora's and Maggie's harrowing experiences in *Nowhere*, serves to "mock[] our narrative expectations" of a heroine being heroic at all (322). Edith's story is forgettable and boring without the other two in the book: within this collection, though, it is a commentary.



What should she do?  
 "Edith Thinking How She Shall Light her Fire and Boil her Kettle in the Wood," illustrated by Arthur Hughes (Rossetti 61).

The next heroine on the spectrum makes quite a large leap in terms of nonchalance, given Edith is quite the outlier within the genre: Alice, and her journey down the rabbit hole. Alice ventures to Wonderland by following a talking rabbit, which sends her on a long fall through the underground. Alice ponders that she “must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth... four thousand miles down,” but expresses no fear or any emotion at all during the fall, save for curiosity (Carroll 1865; 64). Like Edith, she does cry when she cannot accomplish a task — in this case, making it through the door — but she picks herself up and carries on. Though she often muses on what her family and cat are doing, she never wishes to go home, only to simply march on: when she asks the Cheshire Cat for directions, for instance, they have this exchange:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,” said the Cat.

“—so long as I get *somewhere*,” Alice added as an explanation.

“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.”  
(Carroll 1865; 108-9).

Alice has clearly gotten lost, but this does not make her upset; this makes her a fantasy heroine. Flora is much the same: she falls asleep in the woods and is swept on to Nowhere, and only attempts to leave the place because it frightens her, not because she wants to go back home. Though home is much safer than the Birthday Queen’s party, she does not express missing that concept until the story resolves, and she is back at her own dinner. Flora is lost in Nowhere and cries to leave, but the thought of being lost is not what motivates her.

The latter two heroines are interesting end-of-spectrum cases. Edith’s wandering is only a background element to her story, and the aunt-narrator backhandedly writes that her destination was “just where the vine grew, and thither she directed her steps” without placing any significance on the setting thereafter (Rossetti 56). The animals that travel with her — a dog, a

cat, and a cockatoo — take precedence, and are even offered an illustration. Similarly, Maggie is



“Edith, with her Dog Frisk, her Cat Cosy, and Crest the Cockatoo,” illustrated by Arthur Hughes (Rossetti 56).

only lost in an abstract sense of the term. Her story being another commentary by Rossetti — on class, but also on behavior — she is the only one to travel through Nowhere to get to an important destination, and to make it back home on her own accord. However, on her journey to the doctor’s house, she has no idea where she is, and is seeing magical settings and creatures for the first time; she may have a vague sense of direction, but

she is definitely lost. This connects to Irene, who despite being the most lost of any of the five girls in question, never technically even leaves her castle grounds in the midst of this. Her first experience with getting lost is even within her own home, after entering a secret stairway which leads to her grandmother’s magical tower. MacDonald sets the precedent for Irene’s hero(in)ic attitude by emphasizing her royalty, writing, “Some little girls would have been afraid to find themselves thus alone in the middle of the night, but Irene was a princess” (1872; 83).

Once the settings fully immerse the heroines, their motives become set on making sense of what they see. Alice, in particular, makes this her main goal in her novel: the story being a series of vignettes as Alice explores the various spaces and characters who make up Wonderland, only to introduce a conflict with the Queen in the back half, her journey is more self-motivated. “Just as Wonderland cannot make sense of Alice,” Jenkins writes, “she cannot comprehend the symbolic order that regulates Wonderland” (80). Often demeaned by those around her, being called “dull” or told she “do[es]n’t know much,” Alice stomps through Wonderland looking for something familiar, or comforting, but only finds civility unravelling faster the further she travels



(Carroll 1865; 134, 105). Rather than approaching her as a respectable middle-class girl, the creatures she meets “are disposed to dislike Alice, they rarely listen to her, and ‘instead of encouraging her to speak for herself they make her recite... prefabricated piece[s] of discourse’” such as nonsense poems (qtd. in Geer 8). Alice is not used to being disrespected, as illustrated by her “disgust” when the rabbit mistakes her for her servant, Mary Ann, “and demands she fetch his gloves” (Kelly 13). Alice’s behavior does not change as a result of these comments, an anti-lesson of sorts which illustrates the heroine’s role in a story: facing a problem strongly, head-on, and uncompromisingly maintaining her personality.

The elements of normality which are most obviously negated in Wonderland are those which pertain to a woman’s life. Geer explains, “Domestic order thus disappears in Wonderland: traditionally feminine spaces such as kitchens, croquet grounds, gardens, and tea-tables are infused with the contentious, competitive values that Victorian domestic ideology ostensibly relegates to the public sphere” (8). Alice is most challenged to maintain her footing amidst domestic disorder when she first joins the mad tea party, where traditional proper tea time and conversation are tumultuous affairs:

“Have some wine,” the March Hare said in an encouraging tone.

Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. “I don’t see any wine,” she remarked.

“There isn’t any,” said the March Hare.

“Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,” said Alice angrily.

“It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,” said the March Hare.

“I didn’t know it was *your* table,” said Alice: “it’s laid for a great many more than three.”

“Your hair wants cutting,” said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech.

“You should learn not to make personal remarks,” Alice said with some severity: “it’s very rude.”

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he *said* was “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?” (Carroll 1865; 112-3)

The conversation continues like this for the entire party, until Alice becomes fed-up with their



Alice angrily sitting at the Mad Tea-Party, illustrated by John Tenniel (Carroll 1865; 112).

commentary and leaves the table. Even though she is the only female at the tea-table and should thus have some authority over the domestic space, all she knows about civility has been lost. The only way for her to fit into the party would have been to submit to the Hare and Hatter’s antics and become Mad, herself. Alice does not do this, but she does not maintain ladylike behaviors, either:

instead, she attempts to assert an unfeminine dominance in order to control the situation. With this same attitude, Alice even ‘saves the day’ by literally destroying her fantasy: she is suddenly transported home once she yells, “Who cares for *you*? [...] You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” in the hectic courtroom (Carroll 1865; 158). In asserting her dominance over Wonderland, Carroll gives Alice all the power, but also denounces his fantastic setting as something that ended up so delicate it could be unravelled by a seven-and-a-half year-old girl. To young, similarly-aged readers, though, this was a sign to them that even they could be so strong.

Just as Alice finds herself frustrated by the mad tea party and unable to mother the Duchess’ pig-baby to her satisfaction, Rossetti’s upper-middle class girls, Flora and Edith, are kept from their normally-feminine tasks once they enter Nowhere. Flora, following unladylike outbursts leading up to her being crowned a “birthday queen,” encounters a birthday party gone horribly wrong, and an antagonistic Birthday Queen to boot; Edith decides to help her family

prepare a meal by preparing tea, only to find herself unable to light a fire for the kettle and becoming hugely distraught. Despotopoulou analyzes this as a commentary by Rossetti about the supposed changes on the tide for women's rights, writing, "'Nowhere,' in which children face for the first time the aggressive impulses of the public sphere, perhaps conveys her distrust in the possibility of women attaining a free and uninhibited voice within the confines of rigorously policed ideological boundaries, be they of the private or the public sphere" (416). *Nowhere's* implicit negativity adds to this: Flora's story ends with her being so frightened by her experience that she returns home a well-mannered little girl, instead of the ungrateful, complaining child she had been that morning. This is similar to the way Carroll ends *Alice*, by the heroine running off to tea while her sister imagines her growing up into an exemplary domestic mother.

Edith's installment is often cited as the least important in the trio, and is definitely the least eventful. That being said, although the only example of magic that exists in Edith's *Nowhere* is the talking woodland creatures, and no angry antagonist gets in the way of her and her womanly duties, Edith finds herself in a disheartening position probably relatable to growing young women: she discovers that she is "utterly incompetent to venture outside the boundaries of the edenic space figured as her home; she lacks the motivation, the skills, as well as the self-knowledge that would facilitate a successful use of one's independence" (Despotopoulou 429). Given that the aunt-narrator starts this story by stating, "Edith was a little girl who thought herself by no means such a very little girl, and at any rate as wise as her elder brother, sister, and nurse," Rossetti took this opportunity to put her back in her place as a mere little girl, not a grown woman (51). This in fact is the opposite of the empowerment which Carroll and MacDonald brought to their day-saving leading ladies. *Nowhere*, in the meantime, was almost entirely absent in the middle chapter, not because it was not important, but because it was not

needed; bookended by two tales in which the frightening Nowhere and its inhabitants steer the journey, Edith's story's lack of explicit setting elements emphasize that the enemy here was only this little girl's own ego, rather than the Queen of Hearts, Goblins, or Birthdays.

Quite contrary to Edith's land is Irene's Kingdom, which is cleanly divided into three layers: the heavenly tower of her great-great Grandmother, the neutral-ground castle which is



Irene and her great-great grandmother in the tower, illustrated by Arthur Hughes (MacDonald 1872; 107).

invaded at the story's climax, and the hellish miner tunnels which are home to the evil goblins (and, pointedly, lower class individuals like Curdie and his mother). The religious symbolism in these layers is clear, emphasized especially by the behavior which occurs in each. At the higher, holy level, Irene is at her best behavior: this is where the magic happens, in her great-great grandmother's hidden home, and this is where she is happiest. At the lower level, where Princess Irene is barely ever able to go, it is dark and

dangerous, and all but two characters who reside there are men<sup>37</sup>. The mines are occupied by the goblins' kingdom, hidden among the tunnels, and the lower-class mine workers, like Curdie and his family. At first glance, putting these two groups together in such a setting, the antithesis of the comfortable living we see on the neutral-ground and upper levels, seems to harmfully equate the two groups. However, MacDonald creates a disruption in the literal hellscape of the mines in the form of Curdie's singing, the force of light which drives away the cobs. It is this which saves Irene from her first encounter with goblins, not the more refined castle nurse, Lootie, whose royal training proves almost incompetent. So, although MacDonald does obviously place Curdie's lower-class family on the same level as the dirty villains of the novel, he at least leaves

<sup>37</sup> The two female characters being Mrs. Peterson, a symbol of kindness and motherhood, and the queen goblin, the novel's main antagonist.

hints to their separation from the non-human. This is one of many scenes in which MacDonald proves Curdie's worth to the Princess and the Kingdom itself — Mrs. Peterson, too, is later written in the same positive light<sup>38</sup>.

At the mid-level, the level most attuned to reality, Irene is stuck firmly into her role as Princess. In the castle — in her nursery, more often than not — is where Irene is most often admonished to act proper and polite, despite her behavior being more childish in the presence of Lottie, who does not believe her stories about her great-great grandmother. “I know princesses are in the habit of telling make-believes, but you are the first I ever heard of who expected to have them believed,” Lottie scolds her, adding, “It is not at all becoming in a princess to tell stories *and* expect to be believed just because she is a princess” (MacDonald 1872; 20-1). Contrary to Lottie's point, though, Irene never uses her royal status as a reason for why Lottie should believe her; she is so tightly bound to her title, characters in the mid-level (meaning, not her grandmother or Curdie) often seem to forget she is also a person. At the end, as Irene fights valiantly in the battle in which the lower-level goblins upset the mid-level, the castle workers are shocked, for “up to this moment they had all regarded her as little more than a baby” (191). Irene's narrative, then, is a journey of reclamation of her own humanity — showing the importance of perceiving women in society as more than just mothers, hostesses, or housekeepers, but as humans.



Castle staff doting on Irene, illustrated by Arthur Hughes (MacDonald 1872; 25).

<sup>38</sup> In the sequel to this novel, *The Princess and the Curdie* (1883), Curdie marries Irene and himself becomes a prince.

Irene's character arc is long and triumphant, but she never loses her royal Princess status; rather, she gains standing as more than just the label the monarchy places on her. Alice, however, does fully lose herself in the undignified Wonderland setting. Very quickly after completing her fall down the rabbit hole, Alice wonders if she is herself at all, or if she has been replaced by another little girl — perhaps her friends Ada or Mabel (Carroll 1865; 72). She tells the caterpillar, “I can't explain *myself*... because I'm not myself, you see,” following being mistaken for “Mary Ann” by the white rabbit (94). Finally, after she is accused of being a serpent, she angrily denies it, only to not know the truth with which to retort. Uneasily, she settles on what was once obvious: “‘I— I'm a little girl,’ said Alice, rather doubtfully” (100). Once a sure-footed enough girl to follow a talking rabbit down his hole, Alice completely loses herself in Wonderland — as Jenkins writes, suddenly, “labels prove inadequate” (80). Flora, too, becomes mixed up in her titles while in the magical realm: her mother named her “the queen of the [birthday] feast” just before she entered Nowhere, yet the tormentor of her story is a very different Birthday Queen (Rossetti 5). Stripped of her title, in Nowhere, Flora is no one.

Without knowing who they are, these heroines are once again lost — but their processes of being found are what make them memorable heroines for readers. Being that they find a bit more of themselves in these fantasy worlds, perhaps their young readers discovered new things about themselves after devouring these stories. In their obituary for MacDonald, the *Woman's Journal* in Boston wrote, “There is a debt owed to him by men and women alike. But women have especial reason to be grateful to him for the reverent and tender feeling toward womanhood shown in all his books,” especially the famous *Princess* duo (A. S. B. 158). All children had MacDonald, and other authors of fantasy texts like his, to thank for showing them how to have great adventures. Women, though, were also taught the invaluable lesson of how to venture

bravely outside the home and succeed, even in the face of monsters. In these fantasy texts, in order to become heroines, and thereby role models to readers, these little girls must first become lost.

### **Girlish Behavior: Compliance and Rebellion**

The behavior of the heroines throughout their journeys is a large focal point in the narratives: indeed in all children's literature, with boys or girls at the helm, behavior is as central to the characters' lives as it is in the growing readers' lives. Especially given the didactic nature



The Queen of Hearts screaming at Alice, illustrated by John Tenniel (Carroll 1865; 122).

of these texts, providing examples of how or how not to behave is definitive for a text being written and marketed for children. In 1911, *The Woman's Book* instructed mothers to construct their children's bookshelves from "nonsense, narrative and morals," continuing, "Yes, morals, for children exult in them. The sense of moral distinction is keen. No more pregnant words exist for him than good and bad, cruel and kind, fair and mean, true and false.

Therefore, morals must be regarded as a requirement in children's literature" (Jack 488). Usually in such texts good behavior is rewarded, and the poorly-behaved children are either punished or left off to the sidelines of the story. It was quite unusual, then, for a heroine so assertive and troublesome as Alice Liddel to become so popular.

Alice is "by no means a good little girl in mid-Victorian terms," or "gentle, timid, and docile," Jenkins observes, "but 'active, brave, and impatient'; in fact, she is 'highly critical of her surroundings and of the adults she meets...' She refuses to perform appropriate girl qualities, and she refuses to remain in the margins of her culture" (qtd. in Jenkins 79). She travels from place to

place in Wonderland mostly because she has stormed out of the previous location, angry to have been called a serpent or frustrated with the tea party. Wonderland creatures mirror her attitude, and her theirs, as the story cycles deeper and deeper into angry outbursts, culminating in Alice's trial with the ever-screaming Queen of Hearts. What finally gets her out of Wonderland and back into her civil home, where she daintily sleeps on her sister's lap, is "openly embrac[ing] Wonderland's tactics" with one final furious outburst, which Geer calls "antidomestic" (10). Renouncing Wonderland's fantasy and calling attention to reality, Alice yells, "you're nothing but a pack of cards!" (Carroll 1865; 158); Geer elaborates that this eruption, "if only



Alice yelling to the cards,  
illustrated by John Tenniel (Carroll  
1865; 158).

momentarily," allows Alice to "take[] on the Queen's role of a screaming, domineering woman... a position directly contrary to those prescribed by domestic ideology or ideals of girlhood" (Geer 9). And yet, she is rewarded for it — for though she enjoyed her time in Wonderland, what she really needed was to get back to reality, where she 'knows herself,' and get the cup of tea which the Hatter denied her.

Flora, who Despotopoulou calls "the most Carrollesque of the aunt's inventions," receives nearly the opposite resolution (427). Flora's story takes place on her birthday and, at the beginning, while she plays with her cousins. However, none of them are enjoying themselves, and the afternoon is filled with crying, arguing, and complaining. Their feast is hugely disappointing, but not because any of the food was cooked incorrectly: the aunt asks her listeners, "Were these [faults] really so? or would even finest strawberries and richest cream have been found fault with, thanks to the children's mood that day?" (Rossetti 8-9). Flora finds



Nowhere because she is sulking about the outcome of her birthday — “is it really worth while to be eight years old and have a birthday, if this is what comes of it?” (15) — and wanders away from the other children. After her experience there, though, her mood softened, and her behavior was much more in-line with what was expected from a good child, even apologizing to her guests (48).

What nearly traumatizes Flora in Nowhere is the dreaded Birthday Queen, whom she is tied to for the entire episode. Despotopoulou calls the Queen Flora’s “counterpart” because of the parallel drawn in her mother’s dialogue; the Queen, being one of Rossetti’s titular speaking likenesses, represents “a satirical exaggeration of the Victorian ideal of womanhood... a combination of power and helplessness” (426). The Queen presides over



“The Cross Fairy Deprives Flora of Strawberry Feast,” illustrated by Arthur Hughes (Rossetti 24).

the feast and following games, repeating every so often, “it’s my birthday, and everything is mine” (Rossetti 25); however, besides looking angry, yelling, and at one point throwing Flora across the room, the Queen barely executes anything at all. She mostly serves as an intimidating figure rather than an active antagonist.

Not unlike Carroll’s Queen of Hearts, who is barely seen playing croquet and spends the better part of her section presiding over the grounds, Rossetti’s Birthday Queen “stood alone in satisfaction as in dignity” during most of the festivities, upholding an image of power and yet performing no helpful action (37). Existing only for show, these women could be lessons from their authors about what their rebellious heroines could grow up to be once rid of their childish

motivations and behavior. In Carroll's text, the Queen being an antagonist for Alice serves as a lesson for the young heroine not to grow up like that: to be polite, sure, but to also be caring to those around her, and to be a better wife than the Queen of Hearts is to the King, who she rarely listens to. All of this points to Carroll wishing his leading lady, and the girls who read his novel, to use their rebellious childhood to grow into good, proper women — a desire which comes to fruition in the book's final pages. Frances Dolan writes of growing up as a process of domestication, explaining, "...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" (205). Rossetti's take on this domineering adult figure, meanwhile, comes from opposite intentions. Since much of Rossetti's book functions as a direct commentary on *Alice*, creating her own Queen with mirroring behavior to Carroll's satirizes how useless they were aside from their demeanor, illustrating to readers that adult woman characters should be written with as much depth as men, like Alice and Flora themselves. If adult women were written with girlhood-like characteristics, such as tenacity and grit, this would show the heroines' productive rebellion come to fruition: showing readers that their hero(in)ic actions could be carried into adulthood and truly create change.

Once Flora is trapped with the Queen during the building game, the Queen begins to throw stones and destroy all the other buildings in her midst, much to Flora's dismay. "It was a battle of giants," the aunt narrates, "who would excel each emulous peer, and be champion among giants? The Queen" (Rossetti 46). This is the event which takes Flora's fear and crying over the edge and expels her back into reality, a changed young lady. The Queen's behavior in *Nowhere* was harsh and extreme, but reflected the story's former birthday Queen: Flora. Just as *Nowhere*'s five hundred mirrors reflected back both of their faces, Flora recognized the Queen's

behavior as parallel to her own when playing with her cousins: she was argumentative, stuck on having her way, and harsh in regards to food and games. This literal mirror imagery was enough for even Flora to realize that this was a consequence of her actions, and surely the readers did, too. The aunt ends the story on a note of near irony, assuming her listeners would act just as Flora had in their “Land of Somewhere” lives. She laments, “if [Flora] lives to be nine years old and give another birthday party, she is likely on that occasion to be even less like the birthday Queen... who, with dear friends and playmates and pretty presents, yet scarcely knew how to bear a few trifling disappointments, or how to be obliging and good-humoured under slight annoyances” (48-9).

The other bookend of the novel, Maggie’s story, plays out in almost the opposite manner. While Flora is assumed to be upper-class, Maggie is poor; while Flora has a large family, Maggie is an orphan who lives with only her grandmother. Given that *Speaking Likenesses* was never serialized and published only as a bound volume, it can be assumed very few if any girls of Maggie’s class got their hands on this story. Rossetti surely anticipated this and did not write Maggie to be relatable: instead, despite her class, Maggie served as a behavioral ideal, a role model fitting an irregular definition of success. And unlike Flora’s story, her’s does not end with the reactions (or any lack thereof) of the nieces — their voices are completely eliminated, and opinions hidden, suggesting that this was the story which left them at a loss for words.

Maggie goes on a journey comparable to her predecessors’: like Edith, she enters the Nowhere forest with a job to do (in her case, deliver goods to a doctor who lives there), and like Flora, she meets devious child spirits along the way. However, Maggie is not the center of any torment — she is not chased in a game of Hunt the Pincushion, or chastised by a frog for forgetting a simple step in making tea, despite meeting several magical Nowhereians who try to

steer her off of her path. First, she meets the same children Flora played with; the aunt notes that



“The Boy with the Great Mouth Full of Teeth Grins at Maggie,” illustrated by Arthur Hughes (Rossetti 85).

“Maggie had no playfellows at home, and that cold winter was just then at its very coldest,” and it is assumed that she will join them, as any child would (Rossetti 78). However, Maggie keeps her word to her grandmother, although it makes her feel “sorry to have missed so rare a chance”

(82). The same goes with her encounter with the Mouth-Boy, a speaking likeness of hunger and greed, who tries to steal the food in her delivery basket, and the sleepers, who appear just when she is tired and tempted to join their collective nap. Maggie approaches these situations with kindness and stern faith in her promise to her grandmother, and thereby comes out unscathed. These three tests — selfishly playing, gluttonously stealing the food, and lazily sleeping — “all represent temptations and influences to which normally, according to Victorian class and gender beliefs, a working-class girl would have succumbed” (Despotopoulou 431). But, like MacDonald’s lower-class Curdie, she behaves amicably; better, even, than the assumed-to-be-upper-class daughters of the doctor who do not invite her inside to warm up, despite her having done a great deed for them in the bitter cold and having survived the journey fueled by the “enchanted expectation” of glimpsing their Christmas tree (Rossetti 91). In her exploration of the novel, Julia Briggs observes, “It seems the doctor’s children, like Flora and Edith, have no sense of the labor of a world beyond, through which their toys, sweetmeats, and

Christmas candles reach them” (226). This story thus shows readers that behavior, not class, is most important. Maggie being unrewarded and barely thanked for making the journey to the doctor’s house was meant to morally confuse readers, who have been cheering her on all along. Rossetti’s stories, once again, make the readers think.

Maggie’s journey back to her grandmother’s store ends this unique novel. On the way, Maggie saves a pigeon, tabby cat, and puppy from the cold winter night, and even bears witness to the northern lights: rewards for her efforts, rather than cruel punishments readers have come to



“Maggie Drinks Tea and Eats Buttered Toast with Grannie,” illustrated by Arthur Hughes (Rossetti 95).

expect from Nowhere. Arriving home, “when the door opened she was received, not with mere ‘Thank you,’ but with a loving welcoming hug” from her grandmother, who, despite having little of her own, loves and takes care of Maggie (Rossetti 94-5). This happy ending of a very unhappy novel brings to light the false assumptions middle-class children would have made

about how working-class Maggie would have fared compared to Flora and Edith. “By juxtaposing the social situations of these three girls and their physical ventures into the unknown land of Nowhere, Rossetti is testing out the degrees of independence granted on young girls of different classes, questioning the middle-class fear and suspicion of a woman’s autonomy,” Despotopoulou writes; a *woman’s* autonomy translated to a younger age group equals a *girl’s* behavior and the trust placed in her (430). Obviously, given these three stories, assumptions did not hold true: readers of *Speaking Likenesses* learned that good behavior and hard work, not one’s social standing, is what will bring a growing girl happiness.

This message evokes a quote from MacDonald's working-class Mr. Peterson regarding the obviously upper-class Princess Irene: "She's a good girl, I am certain, and that's more than being a princess" (1872; 183). For a text written to entertain young girls who may have dreamt of being princesses, it is significant that MacDonald chose to instead overtly point them in the direction of simply being Good. Behavior is a large aspect of who a child is and who they will become — another prime example of this is Burnett's Mistress Mary, whose journey is from 'quite contrary' to a pleasant, helpful, playful young girl<sup>39</sup>. The authors of these stories use their main characters as role models to inspire not only bravery, but good spirits. Though this is not a hugely revolutionary way of writing a woman, it is a very favorable way to write a child, and a useful tool to get their narration into a parent's hands.

### **The Implications Behind Narration**

Each of these novels employs a narrator in some capacity, and from these narrators, a very particular voice. Some novelists, like Rossetti, create specific characters to tell their tales, while others, like Carroll and MacDonald, allow their third person statements to come from an unnamed character, assumed to be the author and a general 'voice of God.' The combination of the authors' and their narrators' positions impact how their leading ladies were written and the impression they left on their readers as role models. This also has to do with the extent to which the gaze is imposed upon the young heroine, and how much the author presses that gaze into the eyes of their readers, satirically or not. These narrators all being positioned as storytellers — Carroll and the aunt clearly making things up as they spoke, while the truth behind MacDonald's words is more ambiguous — whatever good or bad happens to each heroine can be blamed on them. However connected the narrators are to the authors themselves also translates that blame.

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<sup>39</sup> Mary will be covered more in-depth in Chapter Three.

Though often — especially in the case of *Alice* — a narrator can be largely absent in a text, when comparing cases, an author's choices on that front frame the readers' interpretation of the entire story. The author may be the divisor behind these stories and characters, but their narrators are the figures who paint this all for the readers, and guide their eyes through perceiving the work.

Of the three narratives in question, *Speaking Likenesses*' aunt is the most involved narrator: these are clearly stories coming from her imagination, and she frequently deals with interruptions from her nieces so that she, too, is a character in Rossetti's novel. Her femininity, accented by the fact that she is knitting as she orates, pervades through the stories, and her first-person statements can carry a good deal of weight. Rossetti pointedly has her remind her listeners a few times that she is making the stories up as she goes along; for example, when her nieces ask for a "winter story," the aunt replies, aghast, "What! now? You really do allow me very little time for invention! [...] I will try to be wonderful; but I cannot promise first-rate wonders on such extremely short notice" (70-1). Because the aunt is clearly formulating these stories for her nieces, they are more obviously set up as lessons from a wise caretaker to her young, interrupting children<sup>40</sup>.

Rossetti also uses the aunt's dialogue to paint her niece-listeners — surrogates for the child readers — as naïve. For example, the aunt often uses more complex terms young children would not be expected to know, yet chides her nieces when they interrupt her in confusion. At the beginning of Flora's story, the aunt uses the phrase "Apple of Discord" to refer to an argument. When Clara, one of the nieces, interrupts to ask, "What apple, Aunt?" the aunt snippily replies, "The Apple of Discord, Clara, which is a famous apple you brothers would know all about, and you may ask them some day. Now I go on" (10). These exchanges happen

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<sup>40</sup> The aunt not being the girls' mother is a purposeful choice on Rossetti's part. An aunt is assumed to be more upper-class than a nurse or governess, but without the same parental obligations as a mother. She is more removed from them by not being in their immediate family, though still trusted and loved.

throughout the book, especially in the first two stories, so the aunt's voice is repeatedly pressed into the reader's mind, more like a teacher than a mysterious storyteller. In distancing herself from her narrator, who often reminds the listeners to get back to their sewing and the readers that "this is all make-believe," Rossetti's uses *Speaking Likenesses* as a commentary not only on girlhood, but on feminine guardianship roles, as well (27).

*The Princess and the Goblin* does not have an identified narrator, but the reader can infer that it is the voice of MacDonald, the author, who makes himself known with a once-in-a-while first-person statement. Though this is a novel about Irene, MacDonald characterizes it as "my story" from the beginning, taking clear ownership of the narrative (1872; 2). This prefaces the novel to readers that though this is a heroine's novel, all her supposed bravery and independence hinges on the whim of the book's male author. MacDonald exerts control over even the smallest of details: for example, he stops his storytelling early-on in the book to give instructions to the illustrator so that any added pictures do not interfere with the perception of Irene's home which he, the author, provides to readers. "If the artist would like to draw this, I should advise him not to meddle with the toys," MacDonald writes. "I am afraid of attempting to describe them, and I think he had better not try to draw them. He had better not" (7). This is an unfortunate display of masculinity in a book which shows a girl's capacity for courageous action in a patriarchal society; however, it could also point to MacDonald's progressiveness, as since he has full command over the story, he could very well have had Irene remain the quiet, lonely princess she started out as. This dichotomous motivation behind the narratorial influence reminds readers that very intentional choices are being made in crafting this novel, and that they should pay attention to the significance of even small details. It also points out room for their own imaginations in



that the toys are not only left undescribed, but they are not *supposed* to be: this detail, along with many others later in the book, is a blank left for readers to fill in.

MacDonald's authority over the story bleeds into authority over its subject matter, and he quickly establishes himself as an expert on princess-ship and childhood, teaching his readers about their behavioral differences by comparing the two. "That the princess was a real princess you might see now quite plainly; for she didn't hang on to the handle of the door, and stare without moving, as I have known some do who ought to have been princesses but were only rather vulgar little girls," he explains early in Irene's adventure, barely after she ventured out of her nursery, adding, "She did what she was told" (MacDonald 1872; 12). However, Irene balances her poised royal behavior with real relatable emotions such as fear, anguish, and love for her grandmother. Irene's range of emotions and behaviors shows readers that they could be both brave and afraid at the same time. She at first is ashamed of her fear when she gets lost in the stairways, or her anguish when Lootie calls her stories lies. However, her grandmother reminds her that fear is a *human* emotion when she jokingly muses, "Perhaps by the time I am two thousand years of age, I shall, indeed, never be afraid of anything" (118). The princess' following triumph at the end of the novel proves to readers that being afraid is part of what makes them emotionally-competent humans, not childish, impolite, or girlish. MacDonald chose to deliver this message through the great-great grandmother to capitalize on its impact on readers. If it had come straight from his voice-of-God male gaze deliverance, it would have had an instructive tone; from a caring, maternal family member, however, there is an added element of trust in the speaker. This is perhaps why MacDonald opted not to hide his male gaze when he could have had the grandmother narrate the story: to emphasize the impression the female characters left on readers.

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* may be fully devoid of "I" statements, but a similar adult male gaze permeates the text. Knowing the story's origins and based on clues from the epigraph and dedication, we know it is Carroll himself narrating the story just as he told it to the Liddell sisters (not unlike how the aunt orated *Speaking Likenesses*). Carroll's presence is most made known in the poem which acts as his novels' epigraphs; in *Alice's* sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, his poem promises that "his 'fairy-tale' will preserve an idealized, domestic childhood world that exists in comforting opposition to 'the blinding snow' outside" in reality's society (qtd. in Geer 13). Though *Alice* originated as an oration, Carroll could very well have written the story from the heroine's first-person perspective of her journey through Wonderland when he published it for the masses. His conscious decision not to do so, Geer argues, is an instance of when adults, particularly men, "exercise their power to dismiss the child and retell her experiences in ways that correspond to their own conceptions about fairy tales and little girls" (7). This is potentially dangerous or harmful, given how *Alice* is perceived as progressive for highlighting such an iconic female lead.

Rossetti combatted this overbearing male influence, which she saw as appropriation, by crafting *Speaking Likenesses*, which was one of the first to parody Carroll's obvious position as a male narrator of a young girl's mind. This text shows, as Despotopoulou explains, "that Alice's victory over the institutions that figure in Wonderland is the product of a male imagination with little access to a real girl's dreams" (427). In creating her overbearing aunt, Rossetti was able to include commentary on women's and girls' roles in society even outside of Nowhere and in a more realistic setting, toeing the genre line. "Half of this narrative's attraction is derived from the constant confrontation between narrator and listeners, during which Rossetti purposefully blurs the boundary between childish nonsense and adult wisdom" (Despotopoulou 425); for example,

when in Edith's story a toad suggests a successful way to light a fire, the following exchange occurs between the aunt and a listener:

How came the toad to be so much cleverer than his neighbours, Aunt? — Well, Jane, I suppose such a bright thought may have occurred to him rather than to the rest, because toads so often live inside stones: at least, so people have said. And suppose his father, grandfather and great-grandfather all inhabited stones, the idea of doing everything inside something may well have come naturally to him. (Rossetti 65)

While reminding her nieces and readers that she is making up the stories as she goes along, the aunt every-so-often wards off their questions by giving in a bit. For example, she tells them that she “was not there” to hear something a side character in Flora's story, Susan, said (49). She could have reminded them that Susan was made-up, but in her haste to avoid telling another story — wanting to get back to her sewing — she takes the easier route. In confirming Susan's, and her story's, existence, though, her nieces become more excited to hear about it, and thus her plan backfires. Her emotional disconnect with the stories themselves signifies her motivation for telling them lies entirely with their morals.

The aunt notably will not tell the girls stories unless they are working on their sewing, and often takes an aside to remind them why they are really there. This, combined with her “repeatedly insist[ing] that she has no imaginative abilities,” suggests that “work must always take precedence over fiction,” in the words of Kaston (321). It is significant that the aunt delivers these cautionary tales “which are meant to discipline, through identification, the real young nieces to whom she is narrating,” while having them perform traditionally-female labors (Despotopoulou 424). This, in combination with how Flora and Edith are written comparatively negatively to Maggie, Irene, and Alice, highlights how Rossetti used *Speaking Likenesses* as a commentary on female-led fantasy novels. Flora's and Edith's stories contain no role models

whatsoever, and though written by a female author, their thoughts are (in Flora's case) self-centered and rude or (in Edith's case) slow-witted and helpless. Though Rossetti wrote to her brother that *Speaking Likenesses* was "a mere 'Christmas trifle, would-be in the *Alice* style,'" her further-reaching intentions were clear, thanks much in part to the aunt (Knoepflmacher 302).

Despite Rossetti's subversive intentions, she still fits into Geer's statement regarding "adult figures [who] exercise their power to dismiss the child and retell her experiences in ways that correspond to their own conceptions about fairy tales and little girls" (7). *Speaking Likenesses* was written to be a negative counterpart to *Alice*, but the aunt was not that to Carroll: Rossetti herself filled this role. The 'conceptions' which Rossetti conveyed in this infamous novella were those she believed society to hold, not her own rebellious ideas: by exaggerating these conceptions, Rossetti thus manifested Nowhere, the Wonderland from hell. The dotting aunt claims the story just as MacDonald does Irene's, which makes her command to her listeners to "Look at home" all the more ominous: these stories coming straight from her imagination, her inspiration for them must have been her nieces themselves (Rossetti 36). In conveying this idea, Rossetti and her narrator force readers to examine their own behavior for a brief moment — a feminine, almost maternal command which Carroll and MacDonald, coming from male perspectives, both avoided by owning their narration.

### **Resolution: And It Was All a Dream**

These three fantasy novels are united in their employment of the conventional fantasy scapegoat: all magical experiences being, in some capacity, dismissed as a dream. That Alice dreamt Wonderland is not revealed until the second-to-last page of the novel, when she wakes up from dozing next to her older sister — this situation is used to resolve the story in that it allows

the elder sister to reflect on the dreams of a young girl growing into a woman (Carroll 1865; 158-9). Alice's dreams are wonderful enough to be written into a book; Rossetti's girls' dreams, though, are perhaps better called nightmares. Rephrased, "For Carroll, the dream is a site of independence; for Rossetti it is the locus of victimisation and punishment" (Despotopoulou 427). In the cases of *Speaking Likenesses*, the locations and explicitness of the hints at dreaming are varied. Flora wakes up just as Alice did, a bit bewildered until another child tells her he found her "fast asleep ever so long in the yew walk" (Rossetti 48); Maggie falls on ice, "giving the back of her head a sounding thump," and the aunt admits that "the twack seemed in one moment to fill the atmosphere around her with sparks, flames and flashes of lightning; and from this identical point of time commenced her marvellous adventures," implying her Nowhere experience was a hallucination caused by a head injury (76). Each of these heroines' heroism, then, is shaded with a plausible deniability which could possibly deter them from being real-life role models to readers, since these acts took place in different, unattainable worlds.

Edith, however, is never described as waking up, falling asleep, or bumping her head — her story concludes with her nurse finding her crying in shame. Edith being the youngest of the three heroines<sup>41</sup> and clearly written as incapable of simple household tasks, Rossetti has established her as childish: positioning her story between two others full of overt make-believe, Rossetti evokes the assumption that the docile speaking animals she meets in the forest were figures of her imagination. Auerbach and Knoepfmacher write that Edith "mocked our narrative expectations by becoming the nonheroine of a nonstory," given her short tale's questionable employment of Nowhere and lack of action (322). However, in its position between two substantially disturbing Nowhere tales, the audience easily assumes that Edith's entrance to

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<sup>41</sup> Rossetti never writes this fact in the narrative; however, Knoepfmacher asserts this is true in his article, and her inability to accomplish a simple task like making tea emphasizes his claim. See Knoepfmacher, pp. 321.

Nowhere is no different than Flora's and Maggie's. A daydream, after all, is no different than a regular dream like Alice's and Flora's.

Irene's dream experience is tied to her reality being more of a fantasy than what exists in Carroll's and Rossetti's novels. The adult characters in the novel, and their fears of nightfall, assert that the goblins are fully a part of the Kingdom's reality, making MacDonald's world more of a fantasy than the other two authors'. However, when Irene ventures to her grandmother's tower, nobody believes her, and the experience is dismissed as a dream. Lootie becomes "vexed," in MacDonald's words, when Irene continues to argue that the story is real: she begins her retorts with "What nonsense are you talking, princess?" and ends with the outburst "You've dreamt it then, child," effectively putting the young girl in her place and causing her to burst into tears (MacDonald 1872; 19-21). Irene is almost convinced that the passage was fake after listening to her trusted nurse and subsequently not finding her grandmother's staircase for several days. Once her faith is reaffirmed, though, "she resolved to say nothing more to her nurse on the subject, seeing it was so little in her power to prove her words" (28). It is sad, but typical, to see a young girl silence herself knowing she will not be believed. This is a significant theme in *Princess* due to the nature of its reality-fantasy: due to its conscious abandonment of the standard "it was all a dream" fantasy structure, notes of plausible deniability had to come from elsewhere.

Notions of the more-real reality in Carroll's and Rossetti's novels are at the heart of their resolutions. Geer describes the effectiveness of Carroll's sudden ending back in England:

The final paragraphs, with their peaceful, gardenlike setting and evocation of Alice "lying on the bank, with her head in the lap of her sister," reassert an idealized domestic hierarchy [citation]. The adult male narrator creates and controls the scene, the older sister takes on a maternal role as the narrator's agent in caring for Alice, and Alice herself figures as the affectionate, obedient girl who accepts adult guidance as she was singularly reluctant to do in the adventures. (11)

Again, even in a maternally-toned resolatory setting, Carroll's position as a male narrator must be noted as he restores order to Alice's growing into compliant womanhood, perhaps invalidating all the lessons of independence she received in Wonderland. Rossetti, as ever, took this ending to heart when constructing hers. As previously mentioned, *Speaking Likenesses* ends not with the nieces' reactions, or the aunt's thoughts on the matter, but with Maggie and her grandmother going to bed. The lack of narration here is purposeful, parodying Carroll's complete dominance over his own happy ending. Rossetti chooses to have the only happy ending in her trio of stories to come about on its own, not with the help of any narrator whatsoever; yes, the entire novel is an oration from the aunt, but even her voice fades to the background of Maggie and her grandmother's domestic bliss. They do not have much, but they are Good, which Rossetti hopes her readers will see is better to pursue than the ideals of womanhood as defined by men.

## **Conclusion**

Regarding Alice's final exit from the novel on its second-to-last page, in which she runs off after waking from her glorious Wonderland dream, Geer observes that "Alice's cheerful obedience to her sister's request that she go in to tea also satisfies the adult's desire that tales amuse children while teaching them compliance" (6). However, *Alice* is much more than her final craving for a classic British lady's sit-down. The assertiveness and boldness Alice had to show to rebel in the Queen's court and thereby escape Wonderland — even if it *was* only a dream — teaches her child readers to act for themselves, which, especially when talking to young women growing up in a man's society, is the opposite of compliance. Plus, Alice having been denied tea in Wonderland after her chaotic encounter with the Mad Hatter, March Hare, and dormouse, she is owed that comfort.

Using fantasy as a means to present very real morals — contrary to adult reviewers' initial impressions of the so-thought delightfully non-didactic works — was a pillar of the genre's rise during the Golden Age. Starting with the publication of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, girl wanderers became common characters in Victorian novels. Confined to the fantasy realm, perhaps their bravery could be given the excuse as being as impossible as the existence of babies which turn into pigs, goblins, and boys with giant mouths. Rossetti felt it necessary to fight for the lessons in *Speaking Likenesses* to be taken seriously, insisting "that these are real problems which do not belong confined to some 'fairy' realm simply because they have been personified" (Kaston 321-2). Though these books — minus the disturbingly-negative *Speaking Likenesses* — were very well-received in society, parents could have easily been as quick to write these stories off to their children as Lottie was to remind Irene that her great-great grandmother could not possibly be alive.

*Speaking Likenesses* in particular, though, uses its manipulation of fantasy conventions such as setting, narration, and whimsy, thus blurring the line between that and standard fiction, to make readers uneasy about the nightmarish images, likenesses of their own Victorian society, it includes. "[A]t once drawn into the world of *Speaking Likenesses* and unable to decipher which elements represent 'reality,' readers are therefore offered the disturbing option that this negative picture of girlhood may not be all 'imaginary,'" and the text which left so many adult reviewers so upset could very well be based in truth (Kaston 308). As free as any five of these heroines was, each was dismissed at some point in their journey; each was also reminded of their positions as little children, but more importantly little girls. Though all five of them did not receive happy resolutions, each of them made it home, mostly unscathed, different girls than they were when they left their nurseries that fateful day. This notion alone, that a woman going out



and experiencing the world on her own can change her for the better, is powerful, especially in a nineteenth-century context.

Despite their impossible storylines, fantasy novels are as impactful as their purely fictitious counterparts. They are also further rooted into childhood than more reality-based texts. Adults are less likely to follow a rabbit down its hole, get their tights dirty, or play ‘Self-Help’ with spirit children, and thereby less likely to experience magical happenings. Fantasy stories, and what Geer calls “images of idealized childhood [...] can delight, but they are dreams, illusory and fleeting; furthermore, the adult tale-teller and imaginary child-listeners cannot escape the fact that ‘summers die,’” to take a line from Carroll’s *Looking-Glass* (Geer 20-1). In reality, life continues just the same as it did in the confined pages of the story. To analyze children’s novels is to analyze a moment in real time: however, to analyze fiction with a context of complimentary children’s fantasy novels, we will find that hints of magic exist in these tales, too, and thereby all around us as we experience childhood.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Being Alive is the Magic: the Fictitious Heroines of the Golden Age**

The sun is shining—the sun is shining. That is the Magic. The flowers are growing—the roots are stirring. That is the Magic. Being alive is the Magic—being strong is the Magic. The Magic is in me—the Magic is in me. The Magic is in me—the Magic is in me.

— Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden*

## Introduction

Though the Golden Age of Children's Literature is often characterized by the emergence of children's fantasy as a popular and respected genre, we must not forget the iconic works of realistic fiction which complement them, nor the authors who took advantage of the fantasy surge to use realism as commentary. Golden Age children's stories which took place in commonplace Victorian England were built on the same storytelling techniques and wonderment which shot *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the like into public popularity. Many authors of children's realistic fiction also published works of fantasy — specifically, Juliana Ewing penned *Amelia and the Dwarves* (1870), and E. Nesbit produced a wide array of fantasies including the hugely popular *Psammead* series (1902-6) — making their conscious choices to present other children's stories within this contrasting frame of realism all the more significant. Neither Ewing, Nesbit, nor Frances Hodgson Burnett invented the genre of realistic children's fiction: however, their turn-of-the-century writing, and especially the brave and believable heroines it showcased, shaped the processes of writing and defining girlhood, the practice of authorship, and the field of children's literature as a whole into what it is today.

Before diving into analysis, it is important to restate the distinctions between “fantasy,” “fairy tale,” and “fiction” which are commonly-used and which this project observes. Much of the scholarship referenced in this project uses the terms “fantasy” and “fairy tale” as synonyms; however, as stated in the second chapter, I choose to avoid using “fairy tale.” The latter term is too connected to the *Brothers' Grimm* — a relevant but dated text which is out of the scope of this project — and also carries connotations of lacking didacticism<sup>42</sup>. That being said, when quoting writing which uses this and “fantasy” interchangeably, I have not changed the terms: in these contexts, the term “fairy tale” should be read as if it were “fantasy.”

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<sup>42</sup> For a longer explanation of this, look back on pages 55–6.

Fiction, likewise, is a term which requires elaboration. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines fiction as “The species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters,” dating this usage back to 1599; previously, the term described imaginative invention (*OED Online*). This definition could be applied to literary works of fantasy or realism. That being said, the term is colloquially used to describe the latter, as a separate genre entirely from fantasy under umbrellas such as “novels” or “children’s literature.” This is how I employ the term: therefore, for the purpose of concision, all mentions of “fiction” in this project refer to *realistic* fiction (as opposed to fantasy fiction).

The imaginative nature of Victorian children’s fantasy seeped into the complementary works of children’s fiction published at around the same time — thus, imagination and wonderment became characteristics of children’s literature as a whole, no longer confined to stories which took place in outlandish settings. However, the ‘it was all a dream’ plausible deniability fantasy stories carried could not translate into realism, so any free-thinking imagination or rebellion presented in fiction stories would have to be more subtle to be acceptable. Writing within a realistic scope — meaning, readers could more easily envision similar situations happening to themselves — is much more difficult to make both radical *and* successful, and Nesbit, Burnett, and Ewing *needed* their writing to succeed. All acted as breadwinners via their literary prowess while living tumultuous home lives: Nesbit’s husband had very public affairs, Burnett was twice-divorced, and Ewing was constantly ill. None of these female authors proclaimed their support for women’s suffrage forthright — but, being women experiencing the weight of the Victorian patriarchy firsthand, this did not necessarily mean they did not *personally* believe in the movement. These authors instead wrote themselves into their

novels, using their fictitious heroines as surrogates to live their own freer fantasies while also sending messages to their readers, the next generation of adults.

To gain societal acceptance, though, these brave heroines had to start out with normal, and often decidedly unfeminist, dynamics. Without proper analysis, this tactic is often condemned by reviewers. Quoting an article from *The Atlantic*, Debbie Lelekis asserts that, when compared to headstrong heroines such as the pioneering Alice Liddel or Rossetti's brave Maggie, "Any female character who even *appears* timid or uncertain will inevitably face criticism [from modern reviewers] for playing into antiquated gender stereotypes" (qtd. in Lelekis 64; emphasis in original). Ewing's work has received a large amount of such backlash in recent years, given that Ida only leaves her house once, and is punished by becoming gravely ill because of her short journey. Ewing's somewhat-inaccessible writing style, paired with Ida's embodiment of a stereotypical 'good girl,' is hypothesized to be the reason most of her work, including *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances*, did not maintain popularity for very long — even despite the work's empowering message. Ida is described as "a very quiet, obedient little girl, as a general rule; indeed, in her lonely life she had small temptation to pranks or mischief of any kind" (Ewing 17). She is a borderline-bland character, actually, until she discovers the mysterious Mrs. Overtheway, who unleashes the young girl's imagination.

None of the leading ladies in question — Nesbit's Dora and Alice, Burnett's Mary, nor Ewing's Ida — travel to far-off lands like Alice Liddel, Irene, or Rossetti's girls. Instead, they stay comfortably in their realistic fiction, almost exclusively within their home properties, and are granted the liberation of imagination via the power of narrative generation: storytelling. Through the use of stories-within-stories as a motif, Nesbit, Burnett, and Ewing crafted what Linda Parsons calls "fairy tale[s] nestled within the realistic frame of the narrative" (253).

Becoming storytellers themselves allowed the heroines a greater autonomy over their own realities, a power which real-world readers could then inherit. Each of the heroines in question — Burnett’s Mary, Ewing’s Ida, and Nesbit’s Dora and Alice — ends her story with not only a greater capacity for imagination, but with one of her fantasies having come to life. The extent of this places the reality of fiction in flux just a bit, leading some to argue that titles including the “Magic”-boasting *The Secret Garden* are more genre-fluid than strictly realistic. This is the beauty of children’s fiction: children are predisposed to believe there is magic in everyday life, and so their idea of “realism” is freer than an adult’s. This notion was solidified by works published in the Golden Age, and the examples of child-storytellers within them. Lelekis, in her article for *Angelica: an International Journal of English Studies*, uses Mary to illustrate this, writing, “Mary’s transformation could be viewed as merely a characteristic of a fairy-tale story, but in the context of gender and power, Mary can also be examined as what Foster and Simmons call the ‘female author prototype’ through her story-telling abilities” (67).

Through creating these fictional storytelling practices, these authors paved new paths for presenting narratives. *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, for example, is considered one of, if not the first children’s novel to be narrated by a child — in the words of Anita Moss, “addressing [the] child audience in its own colloquial idiom” (189). Moss’ essay, entitled “The Story of the Treasure Seekers: The Idiom of Childhood,” claims that Nesbit’s careful crafting of the final *Treasure Seekers* volume “fuses conventions of the fairy tale and those of the realistic story in ways that offer new possibilities for subsequent writers,” not unlike Burnett’s novel’s placement of Magic in a realistic space (188-9). *Mrs. Overthway’s Remembrances*, too, blurred the boundaries of fantasy and fiction by having Mrs. O, the fairy godmother-like storyteller, play a large role in seemingly bringing Ida’s father back from the dead. All three novels also featured

strong displays of emotion from their leading ladies: these were more relatable characters than seen in decades prior, written to cry at dinner tables rather than sit idly by like polite porcelain dolls. *Treasure Seekers* even pokes fun at this conventional way of writing young girls when the siblings meet a “princess,” who is described as looking “like a china doll — the sixpenny kind; she had a white face, and long yellow hair, done up very tight in two pigtailed; her forehead was very big and lumpy, and her cheeks came high up, like little shelves under her eyes. Her eyes were small and blue” (Nesbit 1899; 73). When this girl starts to play with the Bastables and “really beg[i]n[s] to laugh at last,” though, the siblings observe that she did not “look quite so like a doll,” juxtaposing the ideal young lady with a realistic girl (78).

In such descriptions of femininity, these novels — especially *Treasure Seekers* and *The Secret Garden* — even attempted to blur not only genre lines, but gender lines. Through developing their heroines alongside similarly-aged boys, Nesbit and Burnett turned the stereotypical gendering of certain characters on its head, creating the likes of maternal boys and aggressive ladies<sup>43</sup>. Commentary on traditional perceptions of girlhood also reached readers through ironic descriptions, dialogue, or, in Nesbit’s child narrator’s case, narration. These four heroines’ learned autonomy and success in their endeavors — whether that be Ida’s reunion with her father, Dora’s and Alice’s restorations of their stable home life, or Mary’s quiet and controversial ending cooped up in a garden — when juxtaposed with the conventional girlhood which the authors often refer to, show child readers that girls could very well defy the limits set out for them by society. So, even though their angels barely left their houses, Nesbit’s, Burnett’s, and Ewing’s stories still pushed the boundaries of children’s literary heroines in ways which made this era of children’s literature Golden.

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<sup>43</sup> *Mrs. Overthway’s Remembrances* does not include any young boy characters, besides passing mentions of Mrs. Overthway’s brothers in her stories.

### **The Role of Storytelling in Writing Realism**

Many of the emblematic novels of the Golden Age of Children's Literature gained popularity because of their inventive, larger-than-life fantastical elements. Works of realistic fiction from the same era, by contrast, did not emphasize living a fantasy; they emphasized the importance of a child *fantasizing*. Instead of plunging the child hero/ines into new worlds that they hoped would accept them, fiction stories directly dealt with the young protagonists making sense of the real world around them — the same world that the young readers were experiencing. In fantasy texts, Kaston explains, when the “natural world” (versus the supernatural) makes an appearance, “it often seems looming or even threatening, rather than standing as a protective nurturing force it represents in the more realistic tales” (313). Though the real world may have been cruel to these fictional heroines — both Ida and Mary were orphaned, and the Bastables were without a mother — the stories their authors crafted for them allowed the characters to use their imaginations to find real beauty in reality. This encouragement to use the fantastic imagination in a different sense than seeking out goblins in a forest was empowering to the books' growing audiences, and their popularity was and is a testament to that.

The presence of Mrs. Overtheway is what turns Ida from a sedentary young lady into a *heroine*. Through spending her empty days fantasizing about what Mrs. Overtheway could be like, and then by listening to the old lady's stories about her childhood, Ida's worldview shifts into a much more open and promising atmosphere. One could argue that Mrs. Overtheway is the heroine of Ewing's novel, given that her narration makes up the vast majority of the novel's body. However, Ida and Mrs. O would be incomplete without one another, despite the



heroine-like Mary Smith having lived several decades before Ida<sup>44</sup>. The two ladies work together to fix each other's crippling loneliness, and despite their age gap, become hugely influential on one another. "Ida's rapture in the old lady's memories underlines their joint isolation," Mary Sebag-Montefiore explains in her book *Women Writers of Children's Classics*. "Mrs Overtheway has outlived all those she loved; Ida has no one to love" (26). When the pair are jointly transported into Mrs. O's past — largely based on Ewing's own life — they both learn ways to cope with and thrive in the present, which they can continue using after the story's end, when they are separated.

Being each other's heroine, they could work in tandem as the novel's heroines, just as Nesbit's Dora and Alice do, but Ida's and Mrs. O's relationship is not on equal footing as sisters. Though they conclude the novel considering each other a close companion, Mrs. Overtheway also functions as Ida's teacher. The story ends with Ida beginning her own storytelling practice, relaying Mrs. Overtheway's stories to her father and writing to Mrs. Overtheway with stories about her new life, having moved away. While Ida's world continues to broaden, though, Mrs. Overtheway's loses its color when the young girl leaves. Ewing ends her novel by placing Mrs. O back into her mundane routines, writing, "The story is ended, but the bells still call to Morning Prayer, and life goes on. The little old lady comes through the green gate, and looks over the way, but there is no face at that window now... That episode in this dull house in the quiet street is over and gone by" (117). Ida has faded into another one of Mrs. Overtheway's remembrances; while the old lady's story does end with closure, Ida's is more active, and promises a young girl growing up with an enthusiasm to spread stories. In that regard, Ida has flourished into the story's heroine, and readers could think up her next narratives through their own imaginations.

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<sup>44</sup> Mary Smith is Mrs. Overtheway's real name — "Mrs. Overtheway" is the nickname Ida gives her within her imagination while she watches the old lady walk to church each day (Ewing 105). To avoid confusion with Burnett's Mary Lennox, I will continue to call even the younger Mary Smith "Mrs. Overtheway" throughout this work.

Mrs. O may be tired by the end of the story, but Ida's energy seems unending, given the fervor with which she writes her letter to her friend. In continuing this inherited practice after leaving Mrs. Overthway's company, Ida becomes a rebellious heroine through becoming a storyteller — if defining “rebellious” as acting against the norm, not necessarily in an aggressive or bold manner. Though she is not saving a kingdom from ugly monsters in her subversion of the girl's (quiet) place in the home, Ida's growth still sets an example for young readers to think freely. Her and Mrs. O's actions to help each other cope with lifetimes of loss also show readers the therapeutic value of storytelling. Mrs. O illustrates for Ida the joys of exploring the outside world; Ida returns the favor by encouraging the old lady's narration and fond remembrances. Both characters thus show the other that their lives have value despite their mutual feelings of isolation. This “emotional contagion,” relates closely to the storytelling practices at the heart of *The Secret Garden*, as Margrete Lamond writes in her article for *International Research in Children's Literature* (134). Once Mary hones her craft, her stories about both growing up in India and playing just a few meters away in the moor are what encourage her ailing cousin, Colin, to try to heal. Stuck in a dreary castle not quiet unlike Ida's great-uncle's home, “The cold, gloomy or dark conditions” in which Mary tells her lively stories to Colin, Lamond explains, “do not in any way reflect the appearance, sounds, warmth and scents of the actual scenes [he] hear[s] described, and yet [he is] uplifted by them almost as if [he] were actually present there” (135). These stories motivate Colin to go outside and thus his health improves, making storytelling as a function in Burnett's novel what Lamond calls a “catalyst for change” (135). The resolution of the book hinges on this, Mary's successful, optimistic storytelling practice.

However, Mary has to go through her own transformation first. At the beginning of Burnett's text, Mistress Mary is almost beast-like in comparison to Ewing's sweet Ida. Mary's

story inverts the girl-becomes-rebel arc we have seen in other heroine-touting texts such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Mrs. Overthway's Remembrances*. She begins the novel, from the very first sentence, as “the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen... as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived” (Burnett 1-2). From there, after moving to Misselthwaite Manor, spending time outside, and meeting other children like Martha and Dickon, Mary grows into a ‘healthier child:’ an aspect of which is being better-behaved. Some scholars argue that Burnett takes Mary’s journey, which is portrayed as freeing and joyful, a bit too far, and Mary is domesticated and thereby made to be an example of a submissive girl. In her essay for *Touchstones: Reflections on the Best in Children's Literature*, Heather Murray presents her dissatisfaction with how Burnett ended the novel by fully-focusing on Master Colin, rather than Mary or any of the prominent lower-class characters who propelled Colin to this point of resolution, posing the question, “What are we to make of a woman-authored text which so validates the status quo, which erases the presence of the lower-class boy of the moors, and so disposes of its heroine?” (40).

On the surface, yes, *The Secret Garden* is a woman-authored text which ends by illustrating a boy’s triumph while a young lady is shut up in a garden. However, there is a difference between ending a story by being stifled and ending a story by quietly finding joy. There is power in Mary’s ending: though she ends the novel confined to a stereotypically feminine environment — the garden — she is finally free from her contrariness. She has created something beautiful by rebelling in a softer, less-contrary way: caring for Colin Craven when nobody else would. Lelekis explains, “While Mary Lennox investigates the mysteries of the secret garden and the mysterious cries in the manor, she develops her power of imagination and creativity, yet maintains her quiet strength” (63-4). Without her having acted on her curiosity and

both unlocked the garden and located Colin's hidden chamber, neither would have experienced their symbolic rebirth, and thus, the story would have never met a resolution. Mary remains in the garden on her own accord, emphasizing the autonomy she has developed in the novel.

Mary's attitude change is not domestic oppression because though she becomes better behaved, she never loses her voice and spirit. "She is not merely a passive girl that is ruled by the adults around her," Lelekis writes, "she is developing a voice for herself and actively participating in the world around her" (70). The garden, rather than an enclosed space where the restricting walls of Victorian womanhood close in on Mary, acts as an environment built on female autonomy. This is contrasted to the first garden described in the novel, where Mary angrily creates "little heaps of earth" as the adults in her house are dying of cholera (Burnett 3); at Misselthwaite, she has created something beautiful, and something *alive*. Colin even goes so far as to describe the feeling and environment in the garden as Magical, aligning this text closely with the fantasy novels of the time. Although it is he who proclaims "the Magic is in me!" it was Mary that convinced him he was capable of experiencing it (293). So, though Mary loses a footrace and disappears at the end of the novel, Colin's resolution is still the heroine's triumph. Lelekis concludes, "Mary is important as a character who is setting the stage for future female fictional characters who are able to be powerful in less subtle ways" (70).

*The Secret Garden* may never overtly stand against gender roles within the Victorian home, but it subtly illustrates to readers why they should question these roles. "Rather than being didactic" — meaning, rather than ending with a clearly spelled-out moral — Burnett "instead presents patriarchal values in a way that questions them without supporting them" (Lelekis 64). Nesbit also observed this strategy, employing dramatic irony throughout the narration and dialogue about the Bastable brothers' views on their sisters and the women in their environment.

This is mostly achieved through her application of the storytelling motif, which permeates this text like neither of the other two novels due to *Treasure Seekers*' first-person narration. In contrast to Ewing's and Burnett's female storytellers, the chief storyteller in Nesbit's novel is a boy — Oswald Bastable, the second-oldest of the siblings — but the inclusion of the motif nonetheless furthers cultivates *Treasure Seekers*' two girls into heroines.

At the start of the novel, though, it could very well be Dora or Alice narrating for all the reader knows: Oswald and Nesbit only disclose that “It is one of us [Bastable siblings] that tells you this story,” and in his juvenile wit the boy adds, “While the story is going on you may be trying to guess, only I bet you don't” (1899; 11). Much of the appeal for *Treasure Seekers* and the subsequent two Bastable books, *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904), came from this narrative style, which Moss asserts “captures a genuine sense of the child's ‘voice’ for the first time in children's fiction” (188). Nesbit's merry band of siblings — four brothers and two sisters; Dora, Oswald, Dicky, twins Noël and Alice, and H. O. — represent a range of personalities with which child readers could empathize or relate. The choice to follow a family, rather than a single hero/ine or two, illustrates Nesbit's “assumption that children are not all the same but will react differently to stories told to them, and that they can be asked to participate creatively in the narration,” Barbara Wall writes in her book *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction* — an assumption that caused her writing to again “br[eak] new ground” (149). Although Oswald relays the stories of the treasure-seeking Bastables to Nesbit's readers, each sibling has a hand in this. For example, the chapter “Being Editors” is made up mostly of a serial magazine the siblings have written together; this is one of few instances where their voices are not at all influenced by Oswald's, and thus their individuality shines (Nesbit 1899; 97). Dora also being the editor of the magazine showed readers how

entirely not-radical it could be to have women in leadership positions such as this one, especially in Nesbit's own English publishing industry.

Though Nesbit did not take advantage of the storytelling motif like Ewing and Burnett did by placing their heroines at the center of it, she still showed readers that storytelling could be a coping mechanism and catalyst for change. If not for Noël sharing his poetry, or Alice and Oswald telling an angry customer about why they were selling wine, or even for their neighbor telling the siblings stories of digging for treasure, the Bastables' saga would have never reached its happy conclusion. Storytelling in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* was also a great equalizer between the brothers and sisters: though Oswald's narration includes a number of patriarchal statements (which will be examined later in this chapter), Alice's and Dora's testimonies and efforts towards restoring their father's fortunes get just as much time and attention as Oswald's, Noël's, and Dicky's<sup>45</sup>. Nothing about these tactics were obviously suffragist messages — however, they suggested a less divided future for Nesbit's child readers to aim for.

Storytelling, then, offered a way for readers not only to cope and heal, but to push against boundaries set by society. Nesbit, Burnett, and Ewing had to resort to subtle messaging like this because their texts were situated in realism, not an anything-goes fantasy; realistic texts were clearer examples for children of what went on in their homes, versus fantasy stories, which were confined to their wildest dreams. Because their lessons were much less spelled-out than in their complimentary fantasy texts, Golden Age fiction novels relied more heavily on the reader's ability to relate to their characters and plots. In these books, Parsons explains, “meaning is not simply transmitted from the text to the reader, but is created in the transaction between the reader and the text” (248). The impact of realism, then, while perhaps not as awe-inspiring as a trip to

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<sup>45</sup> H.O. is far younger than the rest of the Bastables — it is not specified how much younger, but he is described as more of a baby compared to the rest of the group. He, therefore, gets less time and input in the adventures.

Wonderland, may have been more personal to readers than the impact of fantasy. Though it did not establish the Golden Age like fantasy did, realistic fiction absolutely influenced this era of literature in an irreversible way.

### **Hints of True Reality: The Significance of Authors Writing Themselves In**

Though writing for children from their positions as adult women, Burnett, Ewing, Nesbit, and countless other writers based much of their works on their own experiences and feelings. Some authors wrote literal surrogate characters for their childhood or present experiences, while others hinted at lessons learned, or the aspirations of their childhood selves. Nesbit existed on one side of that spectrum, having based a few Bastable stories on her childhood experiences with her own siblings, and writing surrogate characters which scholars can clearly identify (Fitzsimons). Ewing and Burnett's childhoods did not directly relate to Ida's and Mary's, respectively, like Nesbit's stories did to her characters, but many similarities or aspirations figured into the heroines' creations. Ewing drew on the loneliness she felt being unable to travel to see her husband or friends by writing a companion for Ida, an oracle friend she herself would have loved to have and to serve as, and eventually setting Ida up for a hopeful future. She also included several real-world settings she knew and loved in her text. Burnett integrated her experience as an expat into Mary's experiences in *The Secret Garden*, while also incorporating maternal influences into a number of characters, highlighting the importance of her own motherhood. Though readers were not expected to know anything about the lives of the authors of their favorite books, from an analytical standpoint, identifying these nonfiction elements illuminates the authors' intentional messaging in their texts. While Lewis Carroll based his

heroine on a child he wished to grow closer with, these fiction authors based their leading young ladies on children they wished to *be* — and that they wished to inspire.

Ewing was deeply connected to both Ida and Mrs. Overtheway in a number of ways which, without knowing her, her readers would not have picked up on. Recognizing these similarities between the non/fictional women, even over a century later, helps uncover the significance of *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances*. To her audience, though, Ewing was barely “Ewing” at all: she was “Aunt Judy,” the anonymous yet comfortingly-familiar figure behind *Aunt Judy's Magazine*, in which *Mrs. Overtheway*, among many other stories, was published serially. This children's serial was founded by Ewing's mother Margaret Gatty, another established children's author; she named it after Juliana, whom her family had nicknamed “Aunt Judy” from a young age thanks to her own enthusiasm for storytelling and her “aunt-like mantle of benevolence” (Sebag-Montefiore 21). Like her own Mrs. Overtheway, Ewing may have never had children of her own, but she was not without her audience. Meghan Rosing relates the two women as both being “literary descendants of the wise and kindly female mentors in Romantic children's literature, who act as surrogate caregivers and educators for neglected or unruly children” (148). In Ewing's case, though her magazine cost money and could not have reached the most neglected of children, she acted as a maternal storyteller to a large array of Victorian children perhaps not unlike the Bastables or even Mary, whose lives lacked literal mother figures. In Mrs. Overtheway's case, her neglected child was Ida, who achieved this status through her position as an orphan. By writing her with a happy ending and a newfound family, Ewing was also a maternal guide to Ida, the child she was never able to have. This perhaps explains the gentle nature with which Ida is written: she is a piece of the author.



Ewing lived through Ida by having her grow throughout the story: Ida recovers from the illness she catches early on, reunites with her loving father, and leaves the story on a hopeful note. Sebag-Montefiore characterizes Ewing as “fatally representative of the Victorian fragile female image,” as she was constantly ill and confined to her house (18). To cope with this, Ewing created a freer fictional world in which she could envision herself — including an imaginative child, not yet aware of society’s constraints on her, and an auntly woman, who lived the long and full life Ewing knew she would not reach<sup>46</sup>. Ewing lived a rather lonely adult life, especially after her brief move across the Pacific<sup>47</sup>, and turned to her memories of a healthy childhood into joyful inspiration for children’s stories. For example, “Reka Dom,” the namesake of the third *Mrs. Overtheway* installment, was based on a real house: “a house in Devon that Ewing had fallen in love with as a child,” which she also named her real house in Canada after (Sebag-Montefiore 26). The aura of reminiscence in Mrs. O’s stories is so authentic because it is based in fact. Sick and across the ocean from her family, Ewing held onto her own remembrances for strength; just as she writes Mrs. O thinking of Ida, “the remembrance of [Ida] is with the little old lady still, pleasant as the remembrance of flowers when winter has come” (Ewing 117). In recreating these remembrances in her fiction, Ewing kept her happier days in the present tense. Rosing connects this to Ewing’s readers writing to “Aunt Judy” to ask for more of Mrs. O’s stories, explaining, “In their desire for more ‘ends’ to the stories, the readers of *Aunt Judy’s Magazine* are akin to child listeners such as Ida who yearn for an *endless* story,” and a nostalgic author, as well (157; my emphasis).

Nesbit’s works were also influenced by her nostalgia for healthy childhood. Though, like Ewing’s, this period of her life was not all easy, the adult Edith understood that the carefree

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<sup>46</sup> Ewing unfortunately passed away at the rather-young age of 43 after years of declining health.

<sup>47</sup> Ewing lived in Canada with her new husband from 1867 to 1869. It was from here that she wrote much of *Mrs. Overtheway’s Remembrances*, which she sent to her mother back in England to publish (Sebag-Montefiore 26).

existence of childhood should be nurtured. Nesbit's books are distinct within Golden Age fiction novels in their preservation of *playful* children, not necessarily *polite* children — this, perhaps, is why they continue to resonate with readers today. “It is evident that E. Nesbit knows children, their ways and habit of thought, thoroughly,” *The Athenaeum* published in a review of *Treasure Seekers* in 1899<sup>48</sup>, later “identif[ying] as the key to Edith's success a childlike quality that she retained throughout her life, which enabled her to empathize with children in a way few of her peers have managed” (qtd. in Fitzsimons 148). In having such a varied cast of characters and even employing a rowdy child narrator in the oldest brother, Oswald, Nesbit positioned her Bastable stories to speak to nearly every type of child, and deliver the same message of equality to each.

Nesbit's most recent biographer, Eleanor Fitzsimons, writes that the author “enjoyed inserting *herself* into her books” as a whole, as opposed to the memories and feelings which Ewing carefully wove into her writing (188; my emphasis). The closeness of her books to reality was apparent to readers because of the authenticity of her writing — even despite the siblings' antics being hilarious and hyperbolic, their stories felt *real*. This was also accentuated by Oswald's frequent statements to the readers which were phrased as if he were speaking to friends, not an adult author (or auntly figure, like Rossetti's or Ewing's storytellers) talking down to children. He ironically observes, “You can't do half the things yourself that children in books do,” attempting to help readers forget that he is one of these children (Nesbit 1899; 103). This built rapport with readers, rather than detaching the author from the story, and made it more intuitive for readers to apply the lessons in the novel to their own lives.

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<sup>48</sup> Eleanor Fitzsimons wrongly catalogues this interview as being written in 1889. This review was of the completed *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* volume, which was published in 1899; therefore I am assuming this is a typo in her relatively-new book, of which I read the first edition.

Fitzsimons relates *Treasure Seekers*' opening chapter, which features Albert-next-door being buried in the Bastables' garden by Oswald and Dicky, to this notion of real-world character inspiration. Nesbit "recast her siblings and herself as the Bastable children" when describing this hilarious event, which directly relates to the "an incident from her own childhood when her mischievous brothers buried her so firmly in their garden that she had to be rescued by adults" (Fitzsimons 10). However, Nesbit's chosen emulatory character in the Bastable books was not Albert-next-door: instead, Fitzsimons explains, she split her "dichotomous nature" into two twin characters: "intrepid, courageous Alice and fragile, sensitive Noël, who wrote poetry, as she did" (12-13). In doing this, traditional gender conventions were sometimes mixed up, which taught readers to question stereotypes and recognize all children, boys and girls, as simply *children*.

Through the twins, Nesbit not only reflected on her rancorous experiences with her siblings, but on a woman's place in society when directly compared to a man's. Though she continued to use her abbreviated pseudonym throughout her career, Nesbit's identity was well-known — even across the ocean in *The New York Times*, W. L. Alden observed that "every one in London knows, that 'E. Nesbit' is Mrs. Bland" (qtd. in Fitzsimons 183). Though the pseudonym did come with an amount of autonomy, her being known as Mrs. Fabian Bland came with its restrictions: mainly, living with her husband's harsh patriarchal views, some of which she may have absorbed. Although Nesbit publicly presented herself as a woman against the norm, "refus[ing] to wear corsets" and smoking in public (Fitzsimons 188), she was also outwardly critical of women's suffrage. This suggests a conflicting internal monologue, not aided at all by harsh Victorian society and the stresses of her own home<sup>49</sup>. In a piece for *Children's Literature*, Alexandra Jeikner blames this anti-suffrage attitude on Mr. Bland, "whose

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<sup>49</sup> Some scholars suggest that Nesbit's dismissal of women's suffrage was all an act so as not to draw more controversy to her unconventional household. This is also quite likely, though unfortunately there is no way of truly knowing her motivations.

conservative position on the so-called Women's Question is expressed in his argument that 'Women's realm is the realm of the heart... not of the brain and the intelligence'" (qtd. in Jeikner 23). Nesbit, like Ewing, thus turned to the pen as a coping mechanism, and wrote heroines who, though also stuck in Victorian households, could act unconventional while still deserving a visit from a fairy godmother.

In using both twins as "surrogates for [...] herself" rather than focusing on a single Bastable, Nesbit was able to muddle traditionally-gendered qualities, pointing out the inessential nature of the stereotypes (Fitzsimons 10). Noël, for example, may be the boy within the pair, but he is — as perceived by Oswald — "disgustingly like a girl in some ways" (Nesbit 1899; 62). He writes gentle poetry, which was quite unbecoming for a boy among rambunctious brothers; on top of that, he must take Oswald with him to get it published, much like Nesbit got her start in publishing by working with her husband. Noël is also the only Bastable to get sick in the novel, which is a symbolic display of weakness. Such examples of his general sensitivity, and proclivity to turn "quite pale," which lead Oswald to exasperatedly relate him "disgustingly" to a girl (62). Oswald may never outright wish Noël were more inclined to the rough behavior of Dicky and himself, but his snide commentary gives his bias away: any 'girlish' qualities, even when observed in a perfectly happy boy, were to be frowned upon.

But Noël, in his timid nature, is also quite passionate. When he attempts to publish his poetry, admittedly to secure a family fortune, he confesses that he creates "Art for art's sake," as the Editor eloquently restates (Nesbit 1899; 64). Fitzsimons directly relates Noël's motivations to Nesbit's from early in her career, when she, too, aimed to make art for art's sake. However, she had to prioritize being her family's breadwinner, so she left these purer inspirations to her literary surrogate. She directly expresses this frustration in her adult novel *The Red House* (1902), when

another female writer is vexed by having to write for profit and left wishing she could feel better about the situation: “I longed to write the stories because I wanted the money they would bring me. The longing was keen enough to be painful, not strong enough to get itself satisfied” (qtd. in Fitzsimons 67). Though *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* was Nesbit’s first published children’s novel and she had yet to be truly worn by the constraints society and the publishing industry placed on her, she was evidently already feeling that burden come down on her writing, and used Noël as an illustration of the innocence she felt herself losing.

Alice Bastable, on the other hand, was Nesbit’s gateway to bringing the rebellious young girl she once was to life — except, given the fictional setting, in a way which let this heroine-like bravery thrive. When writing her characters, she literally gave Alice the unconventional woman hat to wear: Oswald writes that Alice “makes Ellis cut her hair short on purpose,” as “she always will play boys’ parts” in the children’s games (Nesbit 1899; 84). Alice’s refusal to grow her hair out like a lady parallel’s Nesbit’s own haircut, as well as her refusal to wear corsets — neither girl conceded to a woman’s uniform. Alice plays with her brothers much more often than her older sister, Dora, does; however, she also steps in as a problem-solver when Dora, the primary maternal figure in the book, cannot. Alice can do this because her brothers view her as a confidant, while negatively isolating Dora as “the good elder sister in books” who, according to Oswald, thinks everything the siblings do is “wrong” (17-8). So, when Dora is left out of an adventure which goes awry, Alice’s maternal instincts kick in: as Moss writes, “when he [Oswald] fails, Alice usually succeeds” (195). Nesbit was first and foremost a mother, not only to her own children, but to her husband’s two illegitimate children, whom he conceived with a friend of Edith’s during their marriage<sup>50</sup> (Moss 188). Even though Alice portrayed the author’s

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<sup>50</sup> Nesbit adopted both children and their biological mother remained with the family as a housekeeper, per Bland’s wishes.

louder side against Noël's softer, artistic qualities, Nesbit made sure that this quality was clearly pleasant in spite of the rebelliousness. In doing this, Nesbit showed her readers that a good mother did not necessarily have to act complacently with the rules set out before her.

Nesbit could have written herself into one surrogate character, but she pointedly chose to split her characteristics between the Bastable twins. This decision places a large emphasis on gendered characteristics in the novel which using just one character would almost altogether miss. Nesbit did not expect her child readers to know anything about her personal life, much less enough to recognize the dual author surrogates in the text — she drew from herself not hoping readers would notice that, but instead so the characteristics she assigned Alice and Noël were as authentic as they could be. Though she was a woman, E. Nesbit carried with her both conventionally-feminine and nonfeminine (both non-gendered and traditionally-masculine) traits: all women did, and still do. By flipping the gendering of these traits — which child readers would have already picked up on in their short lives in Victorian society — she compelled her audience to reevaluate why characteristics or even emotions were gendered at all. Despite his sensitivities and her appearance, Noël and Alice were both successful, happy children, rarely scolded and often behaving like role models. If children were to identify themselves with either of the Bastable twins' 'irregular' characteristics, these positive connotations could be very encouraging for them.

Nesbit's and Ewing's works exist on two ends of a spectrum of energy — Nesbit's utilizing a "flamboyance and chutzpah," Sebag-Montefiore writes, which contrasts greatly to "Ewing's nature and nurture" (21). Burnett's novel, though more on the side of 'chutzpah,' lands somewhat in the middle. Like Ewing, Burnett was a born storyteller, known at her primary school for "enthraling her classmates with the saga of Edith Somerville, whose hair, eyes, figure

and clothes were the subject of daily different clichés” (Sebag-Montefiore 68). From a young age, Burnett applied her bright imagination to real life, which, Sebag-Montefiore writes, she found unsatisfying. “Imagination transformed her commonplace world into something better,” not unlike Mary Lennox’s will to see good in the dead garden starts its transformation into what the heroine soon characterizes as a Magical place (67). In her formative years, when Burnett’s family had wealth and lived in England, “Her favourite image of herself was that of a fairy godmother, and the power as well as the magnanimity of that role must have appealed to her;” she offered help to children who were less fortunate, and spent much of her time watching them out her window (71). This role is perhaps reversed in *The Secret Garden* when Martha, the servant, acts almost as a fairy godmother to Mary, the wealthy child. Burnett having also experienced low-income living for a number of years after her family moved to the United States, these contrasting experiences both found their ways into her quite personal novel<sup>51</sup>.

Like both Ewing and her heroine, Burnett and Mary spent much of their lives as expats: she moved to America with her first husband, though was quite unhappy in the marriage, just like Mary’s lonely move from India to England due to her orphan status. These two women soon found themselves isolated in their new homes, especially once the male companions they hoped for proved to be unloving — Burnett’s husband quickly left for Paris, and Mary’s uncle made it his goal to spend as little time in his home as he could (Sebag-Montefiore 70). Mary’s isolation is especially illustrated when she meets Martha, Ben, and Dickon, who speak in a Yorkshire dialect she barely understands at first — a problem the British Burnett could absolutely have experienced in the American South. Moving across country lines was not a common experience which her young readers could relate to, but feeling isolated in a large home, perhaps as the only

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<sup>51</sup> Sebag-Montefiore describes the Hodgsons as “extremely poor and often hungry” in the years following their migration, until Frances’ stories began to be published and she brought a large income to her home (69). For more on Frances’ experiences with the highs and lows of wealth, see Sebag-Montefiore, pp. 68–70.

child among busy adults, was relatable to her audience. This is why Burnett made this a cornerstone of her novel: it was important to her to portray the isolation of the experience in some capacity, especially since in reality she maintained the image of a good wife and mother while trapped in her unhappy marriage. Even veiled in a children's story, by writing about her experience, Burnett could exhale — she felt heard, and thus less isolated, when she used writing as a coping mechanism. Like Nesbit, she slipped hints of her frustrations into her texts here and there, not entirely hidden, yet not hugely apparent to those who did not know about her personally. What did come through to readers was the affirmation that feeling isolated — like Nesbit's positive portrayals of Noël's sensitivity — was a perfectly acceptable emotion, and remedied by seeking help from others rather than bottling it up.

Though Burnett's books are clearly works of realism, "All are as unlikely and idealistic as fairy stories" (Sebag-Montefiore 74). Burnett often expressed her philosophy that 'fairy stories' and realistic fiction should mix in children's literature to promote young people's relating reality with joy and magic. This was not to spread the idea that such fantasy worlds exist, but to encourage readers to cultivate 'Magic' themselves by thinking radically and solving their problems independently. "Describing the secret garden as a magic kingdom suggests the quality of the children's *feeling* for it, rather than an objective observation of it," Lamond writes, reminding readers, "The children are *experiencing* magic, not *doing* it" (139; emphasis in original). This magic, Lamond argues, is joy — joy which is characterized as supernatural "as a hyperbolic catch-all explanation for an experience that is beyond [Mary's] current capacity to effectively articulate" (138). Whether Mary and Colin think that the garden truly does possess magical powers is up to the reader to decide; however, having viewed the story from a third person perspective, Burnett's readers have seen Mary, Colin, and Dickon cultivate the garden just



as they themselves could in their yards. Knowing that this garden was just as real as their own gardens, the connection between Magic and realistic joy became clearer. In this way, Burnett uses *The Secret Garden* as a means to inspire optimism.

While her identity was not as clearly written into her novel as Ewing's and Nesbit's were in theirs, Burnett's voice is not at all lost in her narration. She believed in the power of storytelling as being her own Magic, and passed that notion onto her growing readership. Her later novel *Two Little Pilgrims' Progress* ends with this very message: "Fairy stories are happening every day. There are beautiful things happening in the world; there are many people with kind and generous hearts... giving what is theirs to give, and being glad in the giving — and Spring comes every year. These make fairy stories" (qtd. in Sebag-Montefiore 74). Encouraging her young readers to see the possibilities in the world — to believe that they could grow up to achieve anything, even if societal norms said otherwise — was a very rebellious and hero(in)ic thing in rigid Victorian England. This is the belief which frees Mary from her contrariness, and the belief which she then passes onto her ailing cousin Colin: her motivation then helps him defy society's expectations and gain enough strength to run and play like a healthy boy. Though she was so upset in her marriage that she frequently wrote poetry about her depression, Burnett encouraged her readers to think positively about their futures, hopefully opening up a world of opportunity in the minds of growing girls. Ewing and Nesbit, in similar spots with their marriages, did the same with their novels. By writing themselves in — the selves they were, and the selves they aspired to be — their messages became more personal, and their heroines stronger. "Her characters voice her thoughts through the medium of her pen," Sebag-Montefiore writes specifically of Burnett, calling the trend of Victorian female authors

presenting their own thoughts through the mouths, behavior, and traits of their characters, “another example of Victorian female power hidden behind a curtain of female convention” (79).

### **Outsider Narration and Defining the Girl**

Though Burnett, Ewing, and Nesbit chose to write themselves into their children’s novels, none of them took on the role of narrator. Each of these three novels employs the narrator role quite differently. Nesbit’s first-person narrator being Oswald, for reasons ranging from his status as a boy to his status as a Bastable, is crucial to the story; much of Ewing’s novel is comprised of Mrs. Overtheway’s remembrances, told in the first person except for when outside those stories-within-stories, when Ida’s character is developing in the third person; finally, Burnett’s novel is an *Alice*-type no-narrator story. The language of each of these very intentional choices hugely influences the portrayal of the novels’ heroines throughout the plot. In painting them from an outsider’s lens, readers are given the full perspective of heroines breaking boundaries as if they themselves are watching this development.

Though the Golden Age was well underway by the time *Treasure Seekers* was published, most children’s books which employed first person narration utilized adult storyteller characters, which emphasized an elder-instructing-child relationship. Nesbit, however, turned this convention on its head and placed herself on equal footing with her readers by using an overbearing child’s voice throughout her Bastable novels. Wall praises *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* not only for its smart writing, but its thoughtful connection to its audience: “at her best and most characteristic,” she writes, “Nesbit managed to suggest a relationship in which narrator and narratee are partners, sharing the fun of the story” (150). The elder five Bastables<sup>52</sup>, though

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<sup>52</sup> H.O. being quite young, he always tries to keep up with his siblings, but often requires extra assistance, and thus does not lead any of the treasure-seeking missions in the novel.

ranging in ages, all have their moments of leadership: Alice notably leads the group through a divination experiment, Noël travels to London to attempt to get his poetry published, Dora is the lead editor of the children's newspaper, Dicky has the idea to answer the advertisement for wine selling, and Oswald is often accented as the smartest or best at a given task, given that these are his stories. Though the identity of the Bastable narrator is supposed to be a secret for much of the novel, the reader knows that this joking, playful voice is someone about their age, even if they do not pick up on the hints to Oswald's identity. Mavis Reimer, in her 1997 piece for *Children's Literature*, explains that Nesbit's usage of a child narrator provided a successful example of childhood autonomy to young readers:

The several levels and situations of narration — readers' consciousness of Oswald as Nesbit's creation, Oswald's self-conscious withholding of full information about himself as narrator, and Oswald's alternate reportage of other characters' words and feelings in direct quotation and in the amalgamated narrative voice of free indirect discourse — point to the mediation of language between 'the child' and the world and complicate any attempt to read the children's texts as straight instruction or as simple appropriation. (58)

Especially when the book was new, and the child narrator was relatively rare, reading from this perspective could have been liberating to young storytellers — it showed them that they, just like Oswald, could 'write' a book if they wanted to. Thus, not only did *Treasure Seekers* represent a positive example of female authorship for readers, the narrative was an important precedent for depicting independent youth within fiction.

Oswald does not explicitly admit that he is the narrator until close to the end of the book, but the reader can guess early on that it is him, based on both his 'mistaken' I-statements and the pompous air that comes from descriptions of a given task. On the first page of the story, when introducing each Bastable, Oswald is already singled out as the favorite of the anonymous narrator. "Dora is the eldest. Then Oswald — and then Dicky," the narration begins, before

breaking in the list to exclaim, “Oswald won the Latin prize at his preparatory school — and Dicky is good at sums,” with a quick addition at the end to throw readers off the favoritism (Nesbit 1899; 10). However, Nesbit has already written Oswald to reveal himself to a careful reader; barely a paragraph later, the narrator writes, “Oswald often thinks of very interesting things” (11). It is small moments like these that add up over the course of the novel, so by the end when Oswald reveals himself, Nesbit positioned readers to have already solved the mystery. Making the identity of the narrator a game for readers is not only an engagement tactic, but a way to make sure her audience was examining the text closely, for other not-so-overt messages.

Alongside her known aversion to the women’s suffrage movement, Nesbit’s choice to have Oswald narrate — as opposed to Dora, the eldest, or Alice, the adventurous friend of everyone — could take away from any inclination that *Treasure Seekers* promoted progressive girlhood. The strong irony in Oswald’s narratorial statements, though, points to Nesbit’s anti-patriarchal messaging within the novel. Oswald being an example of childhood to children, he has an unimposed authority on their behavior. “As Nesbit’s own rhetorical device,” Moss writes, “Oswald-as-narrator molds the child reader’s beliefs by endorsing the childhood values of honesty, courage, and imagination, and reprehending excessive piety, sneakiness, lying and lack of imagination” (193). He establishes this voice primarily by commenting on the actions of others, especially his family. Oswald is responsible for portraying all of his siblings fairly to his audience, which he does — however, there is a clear divide between how he describes his brothers versus his sisters. Dora is not at all on level ground with him, despite being his older sibling; Alice, a ‘tomboy,’ is described with more of an approving tone than her sister, but she is still not at the rambunctious level of even her feminine twin brother. The stinging disparity of Oswald’s offhanded commentary on his brothers versus his sisters would, hopefully, lead readers

to reflect on their own gender biases within their peer or family group. Perhaps the most overt example of this is his outright and unprompted proclamation, “I never felt so pleased to think I was not born a girl,” which comfortably-feminine readers would most likely take issue with (Nesbit 1899; 200). Though he loves his sisters, the separation he places between them and living a more exciting, boyish life is stark — a tactic of Nesbit’s to undermine the patriarchy in which her readers were growing up.

Take, for example, the scene where the siblings sit around a campfire, listening to Dicky muse about inventing medicine. Though all of them are involved in the conversation, the girls are left out of a piece of it without a second thought. Oswald describes, “We put tea-leaves in for the pipe of peace, but the girls are not allowed to have any. It is not right to let girls smoke. They get to think too much of themselves if you let them do everything the same as men” (Nesbit 1899; 162). Nesbit herself was a public smoker and clearly did not agree with this or any part of such a sentiment (Moss 188); having Oswald speak like this, then, was her attempting to show her readers the irony typical patriarchal ideals. Even though readers would not have known Nesbit smoked, Oswald’s tone gives the messaging away. “Oswald’s observations ring with irony, illustrating biting critique of an exaggerated sense of social propriety that fears the removal of socially imposed identity markers so much that it ignores how repressive, even unnatural, these markers are,” Jeikner asserts (28).

Another instance of Oswald making a clearly questionable comment about a woman occurs much earlier in the novel, when he first meets Mrs. Leslie on the way to publish Noël’s poetry. Mrs. Leslie ends up being a bit of a heroine herself in *Treasure Seekers*, as her influence gets Noël the meeting with the publisher, and she later gifts Oswald flowers which he sells for much-needed pennies. But Oswald is first taken with her because of the boyishness he sees in

her; after speaking with her about Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, he writes, "she didn't talk a bit like a real lady, but more like a jolly sort of grown-up boy in a dress and hat" (Nesbit 1899; 57). This explains that in his mind, a woman cannot have the same taste for adventure as a boy who reads *The Jungle Book* and is searching for a family fortune. For Mrs. Leslie to be such a likeable adult to Oswald, she has to show hints of masculinity; this descriptive tendency is not unlike how Alice is often juxtaposed to Dora because of her boyish haircut or play habits. Readers would hopefully juxtapose Mrs. Leslie's value in the novel — her aforementioned scene-saving moments, her being a positive adult figure in a novel full of dismissive ones, her kindness, and even her wit — against Oswald's assertion that she could not be "a real lady" and make note to not approach the world with as closed a mind as his. Nesbit's comments showed readers how the world — boiled down to their equal, a playful child narrator — expected girls to act, and her ironic tone showed them how ridiculous these expectations were.

Similar to how Nesbit assigned masculine and feminine traits to both Bastable twins, Burnett's in-and-out narrator blurs the gender lines in her fictional world in order to blur them within readers' perceptions of the real world. Mary, like Dora and Alice Bastable, is surrounded almost exclusively by boys — save for Martha, a servant about her age, and a few adult women, including Martha's mother. However, unlike the Bastable brothers, these boys are often described with qualities Victorian readers would label as feminine. The two most important examples of this subversive means Burnett uses to paint her characters' genders are Dickon, Martha's younger brother and the animal-whisperer, and Colin, the intolerable master of Misselthwaite who, for most of the story, is mysteriously ill. The characterizations of these boys, both when isolated and when compared to Mary, draw on conventionally-masculine and feminine traits, making readers' perceptions of gender stereotypes hazy. This tactic showed child readers that

established feminine attributes such as maternal instinct emotional tendencies, whether in their girl peers, boy peers, or themselves, were not signs of weakness.

If *The Secret Garden* has any identifiable mother figure, it is either Mrs. Sowerby or her son, Dickon — the argument for the latter illuminates the importance of motherhood outside of its connection to a female parent. Dickon being quite close with his mother, he perhaps learned his mothering behavior from her; though he has no apparent father to learn from, Burnett never outwardly points this out, instead focusing on the kind hearts of all who live in the Sowerby household. Mary, by comparison, was recently orphaned, though in childhood rarely interacted with her parents and certainly learned no goodness from them. Lelekis explains that Mary was “not influenced by the idea of traditional female roles,” since she was not close with her mother and only viewed her relationship with her Ayah, who she often hit, as a master-servant dynamic. “Since she was not close with her mother or any other female maternal figure for the first ten years of her life,” Lelekis continues, “[Mary] does not behave as a female child typically would” (65-6). Mary’s intolerable behavior compared to other children — acting as literally contrary, or the opposite, of a pleasant little girl — is exaggerated, making the angry girl at the beginning of the novel more akin to George MacDonald’s evil goblin queen than his kind heroine, Irene.

When she arrives at Misselthwaite, Mary meets plenty of feminine role models: Martha, who dresses her, Mrs. Sowerby, who buys her a skipping rope, and even Mrs. Medlock, who brings Mary to the manor. But the character who makes time for her, most helps her channel her emotions, and encourages her to cultivate and grow is Dickon. “In the same way that a child flourishes under the guidance of a kind and gentle mother,” Lelekis writes, Mary “respond[s] to his influence positively and this is a significant factor in [her] growth” (69). To Mary, Dickon is hugely connected to nature and specifically the garden — which she describes as “Magic” and

like “some fairy place,” even when all its plants are dead (Burnett 90, 106). He is never cross with her, but gentle and understanding even from the moment she meets him; when she first sees him, he is playing music for squirrels, and he cautions her to stand still so as not to scare them. For the first time in the book, Mary obeys a command without a second thought — a command to be still and quiet, no less (116). In this moment, this is akin to taming Mary like one of the kind animals of the moor, though not in the harsh patriarchal sense Mary would have fought against. From his first appearance in the text, Dickon is different.

Dickon complements Mary’s energy, which, though softening, is still quite loud, irate, and unladylike. It is with him that both Mary and the garden flourish and break free of the sorry states which they were left in for a decade — he nurtures them both, caring for them like the garden’s previous owner, the late Mrs. Craven (herself a dedicated mother) would have. Instead of describing masculine and feminine behaviors as opposites, which was the standard, Burnett’s narration uses Dickon to argue that “motherhood is not an essentially *female* activity but a *human* one” (qtd. in Parsons 263; my emphasis). Though he is a motherly figure, Dickon is never described as un-masculine: by his own description, he is “tough as a white-thorn knobstick,” and definitely contrasts with his sister Martha, whose life is consumed with womanly duties about the manor and the Sowerby home (Burnett 128). Yet, he is also outwardly described as maternal when he takes in an abandoned newborn lamb, who nuzzles him when hungry, thinking Dickon is his mother (240). Mary is not unlike this lamb, often seeking Dickon for comfort as her temper was calming despite her proclamation that she “do[es]n’t know anything about boys” (120). This does not make Dickon un-boyish like Noël’s sensitive nature makes him ‘disgustingly like a girl;’ instead, it makes him an earnest human being whom all readers, boys and girls, could look



up to. Readers could translate this concept of ungendered maternal care to other gendered roles or actions they saw in their lives, opening their minds past set-in-stone dynamics.

Conversely, Burnett wrote Mary with some conventionally-masculine characteristics outside of her aggressive nature, such as tenacity and grit, to show readers that being growth-minded was a mindset beneficial to children of all genders. These distinctions are clearest when Mary is with her cousin. The staff of Misselthwaite joke amongst themselves that Colin “ha[d] found his master” in Mary — this word choice, avoiding “Mistress” as she is normally described, paints Mary as masculine to readers (Burnett 237). Sure, she first asserts dominance over Colin by unleashing her contrariness, beating out his attitude in a fight-fire-with-fire manner, but after this initial encounter she softens, and encourages him to do the same; her masculinity, in this case, is synonymous with *strength*. Much of this strength, and that which she imparts on Colin through the feminine act of storytelling, was first nurtured by Dickon in the garden — marking this ‘masculine’ attitude as feminine, as well. Burnett’s clear illustrations of Mary’s capability to achieve physical and emotional strength while staying firmly within a feminine identity make her a role model for all children, like she is to Colin. Her grit showed girl readers that they, too, could act boldly out in the world; her girlhood showed boy readers to not underestimate their feminine counterparts in society, and to treat them as equals.

As with Dickon, Burnett’s narration often paints Colin in a feminine light — though, unlike Dickon, this has negative connotations towards society’s view of women. Colin’s femininity is largely present in his mysterious illness which has kept him bedridden and angry most of his life: this illness is explicitly called “hysteria” by his nurse, and later by Mary (Burnett 205). Even Colin’s doctor imposes this label on the boy, telling Mrs. Medlock, “The boy is half insane with hysteria and self-indulgence,” though doing almost nothing to remedy it (229).

Burnett's choice to continually emphasize the label of 'hysteria' — at one point even having Mary shout the word three times in a row (211) — is a pointed jab at the real world's treatment of emotions. Hysterics were a "common female malad[y] of that era," a diagnosis of which often allowed doctors to avoid pursuing serious medical treatment (Lelekis 68). Juliana Ewing herself was a victim of this ideology, sick most of her life but told by doctors that her pain was caused by "the whim of a nervous literary lady" (qtd. in Sebag-Montefiore 30)<sup>53</sup>. This was unfortunately not uncommon in the Victorian era, for both 'literary' and regular ladies. Jeikner elaborates:

...women had not yet gained equal access to public discourse; this exclusion rested largely on the depreciation of the female intellect on grounds of evolutionary developments and on medical reasoning that saw women's reproductive organs as rendering them prone to nervous maladies and constructing intellectual investment as ruinous to reproductive functions. (26)

In covering Ewing's condition, Sebag-Montefiore writes that "The early nineteenth century classed women, children and lunatics under the same legal umbrella of incompetence" (39); Burnett's choice to include this terminology in her narration illustrated the very real pain which came with this common diagnosis, and its assignment to a boy reminded readers that it was not just based on the 'whim' of a sensitive lady.

Colin may display negative feminine aspects in the beginning of his time in *The Secret Garden*, but his growth does not carry him into masculinity — instead, the joy he finds at the novel's end transcends all gender boundaries. Colin's initial diagnosis is a direct connection to what Parsons calls "negative femininity" (262). Paired with his "frail and delicate" initial nature — quite the opposite of how Mary is first described — Colin is clearly being compared to a woman for most of the novel (Burnett 149). In the final chapter, when he wins a footrace and

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<sup>53</sup> Ewing was so sick that she could not travel across Europe to visit her husband in Malta late in her life. At one point, she attempted to join him by the sea for cleaner air, but the journey proved too perilous (Sebag-Montefiore 29). Still, her condition was not afforded a more serious diagnosis.

aspires to grow up and become a scientist, one could argue that he has freed himself from the chains of this femininity; Burnett ends the novel with the image of him “walk[ing] as strongly and steadily as any boy in Yorkshire,” having him champion over even Dickon (358). Colin’s triumph comes against a stereotypically-feminine behavior which Burnett’s narration makes clear is “a condition to be seen as negative and overcome” (Parsons 262). However, the way she crafts the language around hysteria is similar to the irony which Nesbit employs with Oswald’s views of feminine behaviors. Mary’s masculine contrariness was ‘treated’ with a skipping rope, time outside, exercise, and a healthy diet; Colin’s recovery from feminine hysteria almost mirrors this. The comparative subtext here implies that if given the time of day and treated as an illness, not a ‘whim,’ hysteria can be cured. Though Colin becomes more boyish after the fact, readers could see that this was fuelled mostly by Colin’s newfound joy, the transformative Magic which Mary also experiences when becoming not only more girlish, but more *human*. Burnett’s narration may engender hysteria as feminine, and anger and dominance as masculine, but joy eclipses those stereotypes. This is perhaps the most important lesson in *The Secret Garden*: that every child has the chance to help one another find happiness.

### **The Role of Displaying Emotions**

Across children’s fiction, an element which disconnects children from any present adults, especially men, is their displays of emotion. Children tend to have less of a grip over their emotions than mentally-developed adults, and in such a proper society as Victorian England, any outbursts tended to leave older figures puzzled or annoyed. Reimer relates this characteristic of childhood as making children “alien[s] in space... irremediably Other,” in the eyes of grown adults (54). Upper- or middle-class parents or extended family members whose children were

taken care of by governesses or nurses may have felt a greater emotional disconnect, and thus showed less empathy: this is the case with Ida's and Mary's uncles, whom they have come to live with after being orphaned. This dynamic reached the Bastables differently, given that the novel is written from a child's perspective: the brothers watch the girls become more emotional than they understand, foreshadowing their possible aging into similar uncle figures. Returning to Sebag-Montifiore's point equating the 'lunatic' woman to a child, perhaps female authors like Burnett, Ewing, and Nesbit felt they could cope with their own struggles to avoid this stereotype by imposing it on their heroines (39); in also giving these stories resolutions featuring happy families, the authors inspire optimism in struggling child readers. By reading about and quite possibly relating to the fictional heroines' emotional struggles and their lack of adult support, children learned that emotions were not to be bottled up and to support one another.

The moments of *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances* which focus solely on Ida — the interludes of time she spends without Mrs. Overtheway — remind children that she may be a delightful and polite young lady, but she is also going through emotional duress. Her mother died when she was only a year old, and Ewing writes that her father “could face danger, but not an empty home,” and set off to sea, all-but abandoning the child with relatives (14). Bouncing around for her whole life, Ida had never known a true home; she even spent many months living under false hope that her unknown father would return, only for his ship to have been destroyed on his final voyage. Following becoming a true orphan, Ida moves in with her great-uncle: another old relative who has little interaction with her. All of this turmoil is revealed to the reader within the first two pages of the novel — and yet, there are no tears from lonely, friendless Ida. The only indication of her feeling anything at all comes from her talking to herself while symbolically leaning against a cold window, watching an old woman she names “Mrs.

Overtheway” walk to church: “I am only a little girl, and very sad, you know,” she laments, “because Papa was drowned at sea; but Mrs. Overtheway is very old, and always happy, and so I love her” (14-5). This hints to the reader that Ida may be hinging her mental health on imagining a perfect life for a woman she does not know — these fantasies provide a similar emotional support to that which Colin got from imagining the secret garden while bedridden. This is why Ida, a “very quiet, obedient little girl,” breaks the rules and ventures out to give Mrs. O flowers, an adventure which ends up making her sick (17).

Ida rarely shows outbursts of emotion, but close to the end of the novel, she slips up in the presence of her great-uncle, causing disarray. Ida’s young mind has not fully wrapped around her long-absent father being fully dead, a disconnect which her great-uncle does not understand; child readers may not have been able to empathize with this, but Ewing nonetheless attempts to illustrate to them that coping with loss can lead to emotional confusion. When her uncle mentions her father being drowned (which, remember, Ida admitted to herself early on in the text), Ida explodes into a fit which renders the staunch man bewildered:

Ida’s only reply was such a passionate outburst of weeping that her uncle rang the bell in helpless dismay, and was thankful when the old butler lived the child tenderly in his arms and carried her back to Nurse. The old gentleman’s feelings were more kindly than his looks, and he was really as much concerned as puzzled by the effect of his remarks. When the butler returned with the report that Ida was going quietly to bed, he sent her his “love” (the word seemed to struggle with some difficulty from behind his neckcloth), and all the remaining almonds and raisins. (Ewing 70)

Clearly, from her descriptions of puzzlement to the unsure nature behind the uncle’s love, Ewing is warning her readers that adults may not understand their outbursts. However, Ida never being reprimanded for upsetting her uncle’s dinner (and even being comforted with sweets) also teaches readers that large displays of emotion, while not by-the-book polite and proper behavior,

are completely fine. Mrs. Overtheway herself has a similar outburst upon finishing her “Reka Dom” story and reflecting that all those she once loved have now died — that her community now only exists in her mind’s remembrances, just as Ida’s exists in her mind’s fantasy. Having a proper Victorian elder lady relate to a child in this way bridges the age gap for readers, further encouraging a more emotionally-free future for women and the public in general.

The Bastable sisters also do their share of crying in *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, much to Oswald’s bewilderment. Being the chief storyteller, he even at one point apologizes for Dora’s tears to the readers, writing, “I am afraid there is a great deal of crying in this chapter, but I can’t help it. Girls will sometimes; I suppose it is their nature, and we ought to be sorry for their affliction” (Nesbit 1899; 156). Alice, the younger and less serious of the sisters, cries a few times: the most isolated incident is when H.O. “said Alice wasn’t a lady... Then he called her a disagreeable cat, and she began to cry” (115). This perplexes every other Bastable, including Dora, who nonetheless comforts her sister. Though Alice is Noël’s twin and seemingly much closer with the boys, being a tomboy herself, she and Dora are always quickest to comfort one another. Nesbit makes a point of this to remind her young girl readers to stick together in a world in which men may not understand them; Dora’s and Alice’s displays of emotion are clear marks of femininity, sure, but these also bring the sisters closer. Oswald’s unsympathetic remarks at times when he should be comforting his sister add to the mounting irony in his narration, a tone which communicates to readers that his perspective is perhaps not the kindest path. Oswald’s words may tell his readers they ought to be sorry, but his actions (or the unhelpful lack thereof, in this case) relate him to an ignorant uncle figure at dinner with a crying young orphan.

As Barbara Smith reminds her readers, “Alice [is] the more tomboyish of the two sisters and therefore Oswald’s favorite” (158); it is interesting, then, that Nesbit makes her the more

outwardly emotional of the Bastable heroines. Oswald may be the narrator, and Dora may be carrying the pressure of filling in for their mother, but Alice is Nesbit's most important Bastable symbol. She is the go-between: a tomboy, a middle child, an adventurer who also "tid[ies] her corner drawer" (much to Oswald's confusion), and the sibling most involved in the group's misadventures besides the narrator himself (Nesbit 1899; 169). Alice's open acknowledgement of her emotions when she could have easily hidden them from her brothers even saves the day on occasion, earning her *heroine* status. She is not sheepish — she is brave and honest. The most obvious instance of this is when her guilt for having paid for a telegram with fake money ends up leading to the unknowing teller being paid back the next day. She wakes Oswald that night, overthinking about her 'thievery' and worrying that she will die in her sleep as punishment (173). Oswald comforts her and sets off to right her wrong, which is when he miraculously meets Mrs. Leslie and sells the flowers she gives him. Though Nesbit names this chapter "The Nobleness of Oswald," perhaps with influence from the slightly-pompous narrator, an attentive reader would identify Alice as the noble soul for telling the truth. Much like Nesbit's lessons to her readers are delivered through their decoding of Oswald's irony, this chapter is also to be read through subtext. Alice acting on her emotion instead of bottling it up and pretending she never broke any rule is what led to this installment's happy ending.

Alice is also the only Bastable to cry in front of an adult in the novel. When she and Oswald are selling the sweetened wine and a woman angrily asks what their mother will think, calling Alice in particular a "silly child," she becomes visibly emotional and flees the room (Nesbit 1899; 149). Oswald defends her feminine emotions, though, for the first time in the novel, and asks the woman to leave. He does this because he empathizes with Alice's grief for their newly-dead mother. Here is an instance in which Oswald is not teaching through subtext,

but leading by example. Though Alice is Nesbit's heroine, Oswald here shows all readers how to be a support system, a trait which he learned from his strong feminine counterparts. This scene also hints at the younger generation being more accepting of emotions — not unlike Mary Lennox's relationship with Colin Craven compared to the stuffy adults at Misselthwaite Manor.

Mary's and Colin's contrariness and hysteria, respectively — an interesting flip of gendered afflictions, as aggressive contrary behavior is conventionally boyish, and a diagnosis of hysteria feminine — dominate the novel, which sets its resolution on dissolving both attitudes without reinstating their gendered norms. Burnett makes it hugely apparent that this resolution comes without much help from any adult, and certainly none in the Manor. Mary was abandoned by her parents at a young age, and then widely avoided by the staff at the Manor; only Martha, the similarly-aged maid, stands up to her and shows her that these attitudes are harmful. Martha, her family members, and Ben Weatherstaff are not only the sole lower-class characters in *The Secret Garden*, but they are the only people at Misselthwaite to look past Mary's chronic negative convictions<sup>54</sup>. Mrs. Sowerby, the most senior adult of this small group, even admits that the adults at Misselthwaite cannot help Mary, saying, “she's a child, an[d] children needs children” (Burnett 233).

This philosophy also applies to Colin, who showed no sign of healing until interacting with people his own age. Colin was abandoned by his father due to Mr. Craven's inability to cope with his own grief — not at all unlike Ida's father in Ewing's novel — and is largely disliked and even ignored by the staff at the Manor. It is Mary, using what Martha and Dickon taught her about handling emotions and behaving, who finally helps Colin out of his spiraling condition. The gender divide between these two similarly-behaving abandoned orphans is

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<sup>54</sup> Sebag-Montefiore muses on Burnett's documented “fascination” and romanticization of the lower class in her youth as foundational to her later novels. Further digression is out of the scope of this project; for more information, see Sebag-Montefiore pp. 68–9.



accentuated in what those resolutions are: Lelekis writes, “[Colin] kindles Mary’s dormant femininity and she in turn acts as a civilizing force on Colin” (69). This statement overgeneralizes Mary’s ending as achieving proper womanhood, when in fact her resolution is a greater control over and awareness of her emotions — an ending which is almost exactly parallel to her male cousin’s. In the presence of adult figures who feared their emotions, Mary and Colin spiraled out of control; however, when they are liberated from adults and learn to empathize with each other, they grow closer. Despite their contrasting genders and the stereotypes that come with them, their emotional journeys unite when they embrace their feelings.

Murray writes that, ultimately, “*The Secret Garden* ‘succeeds’ because of its power to harmonize discordancies, to quell its own rebellions” (40). These “discordancies” are represented in Mary and Colin’s gender divide, harmonized by Burnett’s progressive blurring of these boundaries. This development is largely thanks to the garden, a traditionally-feminine setting which in this novel acts as a great equalizer. In the garden, Mary, Colin, Dickon, and even the gardener, Ben Weatherstaff, are on a level playing field: “It is a locus of female authority where class and gender lines are blurred,” Parsons asserts, calling the space “fertile” (258). The garden being the place where Colin’s mother died, it was locked and abandoned in Mr. Craven’s emotional rage: however, it transcends this history as Mary, Dickon, and Colin cultivate it into a space of free emotional growth. Here, they are simply *children*. Though, disparagingly, this freedom is equated to “Magic” in the garden and thereby less of a *realistic* fiction, this is no rabbit hole. Readers were free to dream of finding a setting in which they could experience the world as equals; and, hopefully, inspired to create one themselves, just like Mary.

## **Conclusion**

To a child's imaginative mind, each of these works of fiction *do* have notes of fantasy within them, just as *The Secret Garden* creates its own enclosed Wonderland — however, it is not some higher force which creates this Magic, but the heroines themselves. Connecting the idea of genre-fluidity in children's literature to Nesbit's work, Moss writes, "Structurally, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* fuses conventions of the fairy tale and those of the realistic story in ways that offer new possibilities for subsequent writers" (189). Though the Bastables exist in a realistic setting — their family home, and the nearby bustling city — they create adventures for themselves which often lead them to borderline-fantastic theories. The scene with the divining-rod is the most clear-cut example of toeing the genre line, but even the introductory chapter, in which they truly do find buried "treasure" (a very small amount of money), exudes the wonderment of a fantasy text<sup>55</sup>. The novel even ends with what Oswald calls, "the coach of the Fairy Godmother:" really, the children's rich uncle, who has come to give them presents and eventually raise them in his mansion (Nesbit 1899; 229).

Each of these three works of fiction end with an adult — a male adult, being a father or an uncle — leading the hero/ines to a somehow better life. Ida moves away with her father, finally having found a family; the Bastables go to live with their rich uncle, with the chance of an education and prosperous future once again on the horizon; and Colin reunites with his father, whose eyes are newly reopened to his parental role. Though these male adults lead the charge to the novels' resolutions, the heroines are the happy endings' instigators. Mary, though absent from her ending, was integral in Colin reaching this point of true energetic boyhood, an "Athlete, [a] Lecturer, [a] Scientific Discoverer [...] a laughable, lovable, healthy young human thing" (Burnett 356). "Even though the time period and culture in which Mary lives only allow her to

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<sup>55</sup> For the original illustration of Alice leading a parade of her siblings with the divining rod (really, an umbrella), drawn by H.R. Millar, see Fitzsimons (supplement).

have partial or temporary authority, she still uses that power to grow and develop as an individual,” Lelekis explains (70); so while out of the spotlight, Mary’s ending is still empowering and her story fulfilled. She has found her chosen family.

Ida may have started her story in a desolate situation, but she never lost hope that she would reunite with her father — her capacity to dream, and thus to lose herself in Mrs. O’s



“Tea with Mrs. Overthway,” illustrated by J. A. Pasquire (Ewing 71).

stories, was her guiding Magic. Though she ends the novel with her *biological* family, the emphasis remains on the *chosen* family she gained in the process: Mrs. Overthway, and the warm remembrances of her past. Her father may have been saved from his desert island exile without her knowing, but she held strong to her belief that she would one day meet him even when told he was dead. Mrs. Overthway could sense this undaunted optimism, and sobbed tears of joy when she was the one to break the wonderful news to Ida (Ewing 115). Rosing, in her analysis of Ida’s and Mrs. O’s relationship, asserts that “the fragments of a so-called broken family need not be remade into a traditional family unit but can instead be linked to one another to form a flexible extended family” (147-8). Ewing did not need to bring Ida’s father back from the presumed-dead for Ida to have a happy ending; Ida created one for herself, and for Mrs. Overthway, by forging a relationship with the old lady. Her father’s resurrection is more symbolic of a traditional happy ending to a children’s tale than necessary for Ida’s character, whose growth throughout the novel is independent of any adult male figure.

Moss takes a similar stance as Ewing may have, writing that the “convention of literary childhood [...] depends upon the presence of a secure family;” continuing, she adds, “Children genuinely neglected must confront painful abandonment and isolation, not the joyous liberation to play and imagine in a world of their own” (194). This is where Mary and the Bastable sisters are separate from Ida, whose novel did not see nearly as much success as the former’s: Mary found security in her chosen family at Misselthwaite and thus was able to “play and imagine” in the garden, and Dora and Alice, though in a distressing financial situation and grieving their mother, were secure with their siblings, and thus played and imagined all day at home. Ida, without much of a family or any other children to interact with, did not play — however, thanks to the routine she found with Mrs. O, she found that she loved to imagine. Imagining, then, was one of the core principles of Golden Age realistic fiction, and separated these novels from fantasy works in which imagination was inseparable from life. It was through *attempting* to bring their imaginations to life — manifesting garden Magic, actually meeting the beautiful Mrs. Overthway, and treasure-seeking — that the leading ladies of these novels became heroines.

Parsons, quoting Anne Lundin, suggests that “favorite childhood stories become autobiographical as we adopt them as personal expressions of ‘our deepest wishes and fantasies, our heart’s desire’” (qtd. in Parsons 250). This notion is central to the Golden Age of children’s literature as a whole, but especially to realistic fiction, which audiences can more easily empathize with. This is evident in Burnett, Ewing, and Nesbit having written themselves into their novels to varying extents, and their characters crafting their own deeply-personal tales through storytelling practices. Most importantly, though, this idea is present in examples of empathy throughout the texts — perhaps the biggest lesson in these books is to apply the stories to one’s own life. Writing emotional characters was central to accomplishing this. For example,

in *The Secret Garden*, the first ‘friend’ Mary makes is a robin, who eventually shows her the entrance to the garden. At first she is confused by the bird’s interest in her, but, as Parsons explains, “After Ben tells Mary about caring for the robin because its parents had abandoned it, she connects the robin’s plight to her own and is able to acknowledge her loneliness” (261). None of the rest of the story would have taken place without this, Mary’s first time empathizing with another living creature.

Similarly, Ida and Mrs. Overtheway, separated by decades of age and experience, connect as lonely souls. Rosing conceptualizes their relationship as being formed on “collaborating on shaping a story [...] and leaving these stories unfinished and extendable” (147). This is still the case even when Ida leaves: they both will continue to formulate and tell stories about and for the other. Dora and Alice also, though serving different roles within their family, are connected through a mutual understanding: being sisters in a house full of boys. Their moments together always catch the attention of Oswald, who clearly does not feel some sort of special bond with his brothers which he sees his sisters have. In lumping them together in statements ranging in significance — from “the girls wouldn’t dig with spades that had cobwebs on them. Girls would never do for African explorers or anything like that, they are too beastly particular,” to “Girls seem not to mind saying things that we don’t say” (Nesbit 1899; 22, 93) — Oswald’s lack of empathy illuminates how girls were seen in Victorian society. His sudden burst of defensive empathy when Alice cries for her mother, though, demonstrates a behavior which all siblings should take note of: looking out for one another.

Realistic Golden Age fiction taught children lessons by illuminating the non-necessity of gendering of characteristics and behavior. In examining female-authored works of Golden Age fiction, the increased veiling of these lessons in comparison to works of fantasy becomes

apparent — however, the notions of emotional health, open-mindedness, breaking barriers, and questioning stereotypes still shine through. All with bits of Magic within them, these fiction novels showed Victorian children, regardless of their genders, the possibilities of adventure from (mostly) the comforts of their middle-class homes — if only the readers could learn how to craft stories and challenge conventions like the writers, and narrators, were doing for them. Oswald Bastable may observe that “You can’t do half the things yourself that children in books do,” but taking into account his function as an ironic messenger, Nesbit likely meant the opposite: that, even if one cannot possibly fall through a rabbit hole to Wonderland, reality is always open to the imagination (Nesbit 1899; 103).

### **Conclusion**

“There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs forever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in the curtain... almost anything may happen.”

— E. Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*

Much of the Golden Age of Children's Literature was based on its strong heroines and female authors — but its success is also owed to its hungry audience of child readers. As Edith Honig writes, female authors “would change the outlook of the children who came to know and love them. If adults were not, for the most part, reading about vibrant, achieving, powerful women, at least in fantasies children were. Authors of vision and courage were planting tiny seeds of rebellion, and if they received further nourishment, they might one day bear fruit” (132). This “further nourishment” was provided to hungry readers in the form of the onslaught of literature which was published during this half-century era: literature which was inspired by what came before it, no matter what genre it fit into. Authors continued to produce brave stories with growing involvement from heroines, themselves the same ages as those who read these novels. Nesbit is famously cited as pioneering the child narrator and “breaking new ground,” as Barbara Wall writes, in “her assumption that children are not all the same but will react differently to stories told to them, and that they can be asked to participate creatively in the narration” (149). Nesbit may get a large amount of credit for the Golden Age's relevance and success — all of which is earned — but it was the collective library of work published in this era which made sure this “fruit” of a progressive future would be born. This library is often sorted into the opposing genres of fantasy and realistic fiction; however, the dialogue between these categories of literature is what truly propelled the Golden Age's heroines to their place in history.

Roger Lancelyn Green, a noted Golden Age scholar, writes, “Magic to most children is only just out of reach: it fills their imaginings and informs their games” (47). This highlights the essence of childhood: finding magic everywhere, and believing in the impossible. Children's literature succeeded when authors focused their writing on *them*, not their parents, who were technically the consumers. This is why Rossetti's and Ewing's works have faded from the public



sphere over time: *Speaking Likenesses* was frightening and generated limited appeal, and *Mrs. Overthway's Remembrances* is written for a “dual audience,” as Wall asserts (85). Ewing “found it difficult to address any narratee as other than an equal, and for this reason her stories were regarded from their first appearance as difficult for children,” Wall explains (84). This is in part due to her use of Mrs. O as a surrogate “authorial persona” for most of the novel, a storyteller who at first puts even Ida to sleep (86). The latter four authors’ works are still in print in today’s very different world, over 100 years since each novel’s publication, because their imagery and hopeful undertones transcend their time periods. Nesbit understood the potential for a child to see magic in everyday life and the implications of harnessing this, writing in her fantasy novel *The Enchanted Castle* (1907), “There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs forever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in the curtain... almost anything may happen” (204).

The Golden Age marked a convergence of literature for boys and girls which clearly defined this genre as *children's* literature. Prior to the Golden Age, this broad category was composed of short fairy tales, conduct books, and etiquette manuals — small bits of imagination interspersed between plain, rigid instructions for polite, gendered behavior. Golden Age novels, incited by the pioneering elements and resulting success of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, showed all children, regardless of gender, the possibility of harnessing their own autonomy, and that happy endings would follow this venture. The increased representation of heroines showed boys and girls that they existed on an equal footing, despite the surrounding Victorian patriarchy. This did not assimilate the genders, but instead emphasized the importance of everyone’s individuality: girls were shown their own potential, and boys were shown that their feminine

counterparts did not have to have short hair and play boys' parts, like Alice Bastable, to be worthy playmates.

Fantasy novels and their adventuring heroines led this shift in literature, but fiction quickly adapted and caught on; fantasies thus paved the way for more inclusive fiction. Rather than being left in the dust by fantasy, fiction used its popularity as fuel for its own in-genre revolution. "The fairy-tale formula becomes a strength rather than a weakness by providing a familiar and timeless structure upon which to build," Rosemary Threadgold writes, emphasizing "timeless" to highlight the non-Victorian nature of Golden Age writing (118). These novels may have been written for Victorian audiences, but the child readers would grow into post-Victorian adults, and pass these stories on to their own children. Wonderlands and the like easily stand the test of time because they are separated from the real world; the Ida's and the Bastables' homes and Misselthwaite manor, though devoid of modern technology, also hold timelessness in their bases on childhood essence. To borrow a quote from Mrs. O herself, "It is true in Fairy-land there are advantages which cannot always be reckoned upon by commonplace children in this commonplace world" (Ewing 16); while fantasies inspired adventure, they were veiled by a conscious impossibility, a plausible deniability which kept the rebellious stories from becoming taboo. Fiction, without this element in its real-world settings, borrowed a sense of adventure from its counterpart genre and adapted it. Its heroines — Dora, Alice B., Mary, and even Ida, specifically — showed readers the place for imagination in the real world.

One could argue that fiction's borrowing of fantasy elements blurs the borders of genred space; however, the ways these genres built each other up further solidified their definitive boundaries within the greater genre of children's literature. Fantasy stayed in impossible space, for example, but fiction's use of imaginative thinking made the potential for magic an element of

their parent genre. This is why *The Secret Garden*, which depends on its characters' belief in "Magic," shines within the realm of fiction; likewise, Ida's father's seemingly-impossible rescue makes sense in fiction because Ida's *belief* in it happening never faltered. Both subgenres gave child readers "the ability to see themselves as coherent," free-thinking, and autonomous characters, Mavis Reimer writes, adding that this literature provided readers with "the illusion of power" (54). Creating this power, and a more progressive future as a hopeful result, was the motivation for these authors to write successful young heroines — and these heroines became trademarks of the greater genre of children's literature as a result. Thus, fantasy and fiction each took equal part in defining in the crucial period which scholars now call children's literature's Golden Age.

Deborah Thacker writes that George MacDonald's "belief in the innate goodness of children... allows him to provide a relationship with a more 'feminine' discourse that calls attention to the autonomy of any individual to pursue his or her own interpretation, rather than, as the author, imposing meaning" (9). Thacker's point elucidates two important elements of Golden Age authorship: first, consciously hiding didacticism, so that readers would "interpret" their stories by making their own connections, and second, that empathizing and identifying with a narrative was a feminine practice. This recalls Anne Lundin's notion, as paraphrased by Linda Parsons, "that favorite childhood stories become autobiographical as we adopt them as personal expressions of 'our deepest wishes and fantasies, our heart's desire'" (qtd. in Parsons 250). So, when taking in these novels' lessons about showing emotion, playing freely, and cultivating tenacity, readers would also contextualize them with their own lived experiences, connecting them to the text more deeply. Thacker calls this action 'feminine' because it is full of quiet power: if readers realized this, they would draw positive associations with girlhood.

It helped when the novels included elements or characters they could quickly empathize with, especially if these elements were situated in unattainable worlds. Nesbit's trademark group of siblings in her novels was a tried-and-true means of relating to the most possible readers; other authors took the approach of writing under-represented characters for the readers who were never given the chance to relate to a story. Green cites Mary Lennox in her borderline-magical garden as an example, writing, "*The Secret Garden* (1911), is one of great individuality and astonishing staying power... a brilliant piece of work, showing unusual understanding of introspective unlikeable children with a sincerity that captures many young readers and most older ones" (43). Though Mary's (and Colin's) contrariness were exaggerated in Burnett's narrative, many children dealing with onslaughts of emotions could relate to their outbursts and general anger. Readers presumably would not have a secret garden to cultivate and make anew, but they could use Mary's journey to wellness as a framework for their own. This incited what Margrete Lamond dubs "emotional contagion" between characters and readers (134).

Readers' autonomy was also encouraged when texts directly showed them the impact they could have on something worldwide: a text itself. *Alice* and *Speaking Likenesses* did this by including interruptions by children in the stories — the second much more overtly than the first. *Alice*, as scholars know today, was based on a story Carroll told orally to the three Liddell sisters on July 4, 1862 (Helson 72). Carroll alludes to the inspiration for his novel in its prologue, a verse poem. He first contextualizes the scene, writing "All in the golden afternoon / Full leisurely we glide;" then reveals his excited audience, writing "Yet what can one poor voice avail / Against three tongues together?" and finally mentions their input on the story, noting, "Tertia<sup>56</sup> interrupts the tale / Not more than once a minute" (Carroll 1865; 61). Green speculates that since

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<sup>56</sup> "Tertia" referred to the youngest Liddell sister; the poem also references the older two, naming them "Prima," and "Secunda," respectively. See Kelly's annotations, pp. 61.

this story was created on the spot, the Liddel sisters “suppl[ied] much of the inspiration while he told [the story] by the interruptions, suggestions and criticism which are inseparable from composition in this kind” (40); this would explain the incomparable imagination in the novel, as well as the noted interruptions from “Tertia.” *Speaking Likenesses*, meanwhile, included interruptions directly into the aunt’s narration. Each aside is formatted in brackets, a visual cue for readers to briefly exit the stories-within-a-story. The most important of these interruptions concern a frog in Flora’s story, which the nieces are (for reasons the aunt cannot understand) so taken with, they ask for a separate story about it: so generates Edith’s chapter (Rossetti 49-50). The nieces also influence Maggie’s story by asking for it to take place in winter (70). The aunt may be annoyed with these interludes, but she also expects them: when the first interruption comes to Edith’s story, for example, she is almost relieved, saying, “I have been wondering at the no remarks, but here one comes at last” (57). She never punishes the nieces for speaking their minds — which, considering what she inflicts on her Nowhere heroines, is notable — besides the occasional comment to redirect their attention to their sewing. This would show readers of *Speaking Likenesses* that this type of behavior, expressing opinions and being engaged, is actually favorable; it also opened their eyes to the power they could have over media like novels, which would reach wide audiences of listening ears.

Sarah Bilston writes, “a girl’s ability to become lost in the pleasure of her reading, to be self-directing rather than self-regulating and to negotiate textual meaning introduces her as a character who may deviate from orthodox cultural paths” (9). This notion of a ‘reading character’ points to Ida, who learns to thrive as a result of absorbing stories; Mary’s cousin Colin has a similar arc. But most importantly, the Victorian audiences were these ‘reading characters’ come to life: these were children of all genders “lost in the pleasure of reading” not about how

they *should* behave, but how they *could* behave. Golden Age fantasy and fiction literature, in their conversational influence on one another, taught child readers that “self-directing” autonomy



Irene giving Curdie his kiss, illustrated by Arthur Hughes (MacDonald 222).

and “deviat[ing] from orthodox cultural paths” would still yield happy endings. Alice skipped off to enjoy tea; Irene’s kingdom was saved, and she gave Curdie his long-awaited kiss; Flora and Edith found more gratitude for their everyday lives, and Maggie returned to her grandmother with a new pet; Ida was reunited with her father; the Bastables found a new home and money for their father; and finally, Mary found happiness, and helped another child do the same. These heroines were all better off thanks to having “br[oken]

socially enforced silence” and “assuming agency,” qualities which Linda Parsons also attributes to female authors like Rossetti, Ewing, Nesbit, and Burnett as “teller[s] of the tale[s]” (Parsons 254). From all angles, then, female autonomy lifted child readers into more open futures for literature and for general life.

The Golden Age ended with the start of a new era — World War I — but its influence permeates children’s literature of all genres today. Its readers became the next generation of writers: the next female writers to ‘attempt the pen,’ and the next male authors to promote rebellious heroines. Fantasy texts first laid the groundwork for expansive children’s literature, filled with plenty of symbols and narrative elements behind which to hide unconventional lessons. From these fantasies came innovative new works of realistic fiction which, while taking place in the unimaginative Victorian home, built on fantasy’s elements and expanded the motif of the surrogate storyteller to add wonderment to everyday life. Children across Victorian England, and the world, suddenly had an endless supply of optimism in the form of happy endings and

triumphant protagonists, many of whom were brave heroines. The cross-genre conversation between fantasy and fiction is what made these heroines so successful, and thus made this a “Golden” age. This project adds this genred lens to the ongoing conversation about girlhood in late nineteenth-century British children’s literature, illuminating the ways these authors, and their protagonists, encouraged a new generation of real-world hero(in)es. After reading Golden Age novels, children may not have incited a revolution, but their worldviews changed. These novels, and their authors, equipped readers with the courage to believe “as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Lewis Carroll & *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Charles Ludwidge Dodgson, who wrote under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, was a math professor at Christ's College in England; he was also a bit of a recluse, avoiding adult company due to his stammering speech (Helson 72). His interactions with adults came mostly from his photography practice, which he continued throughout his life; he notably photographed the Rossetti family in 1863 and remained in contact with Christina in particular for at least a decade (Knoepflmacher 302). He began publishing under Carroll's name 1856, submitting parody poems, similar to those which ended up in his *Alice* stories, to *The Train* (Kelly 51). This was around the same time he met three young girls who would entirely change his life: Lorina, Edith, and Alice Liddell.

Carroll adored children and was at ease around them, and reportedly lost his stammer when he told the Liddell sisters stories (Green 40). He was particularly taken with Alice, after whom he named what effectively became his legacy: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872). The former, now one of the most widely-adapted texts in the English language, originated orally, told on a boat ride with the Liddell sisters on July 4, 1862 (Helson 72). Carroll later wrote in his journals that the story came to be “in a desperate attempt to strike out some new line in fairy-lore,” adding, “I had sent my heroine straight down a rabbit-hole, to begin with, without the least idea what was to happen afterwards” (qtd. in Helson 73).

*Alice* follows its titular heroine down her long fall through a rabbit hole and into “Wonderland” — although, her first conflict is finding its entrance. In order to acquire the key to the door to Wonderland, and then to fit through it, Alice must balance between drinking a potion



which makes her shrink and eating a cake which makes her grow, and continues this shuffle throughout her time in Wonderland. Once swimming into Wonderland in a pool of her own tears, Alice wanders aimlessly through, looking only for somewhere to go, never an escape. Along the way, she meets the white rabbit whose hole she fell through, a dodo bird and his gaggle of talking animals, a hookah-smoking caterpillar, a singing tortoise, an abusive human mother whose baby turns into a pig, a grinning cheshire cat, patrons of a “mad tea party,” and finally, the Queen of Hearts, her husband, and her royal subjects (walking, talking playing cards). Alice’s main goal in her adventure is to make sense of this new world around her, where characters speak in parody poems and logic puzzles with no known answer. She finally leaves Wonderland by exclaiming the impossibility of it: she yells, “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” and suddenly her dreamland melts away, and she wakes up from what she discovers was a long nap (Carroll 1865; 158). She runs off to fetch tea, the same little Victorian girl she was at the story’s beginning, but now with a more open, colorful mind.

Carroll first titled his novel *Alice’s Adventures Underground* and illustrated it himself; with encouragement from his publisher, however, *Punch* magazine’s esteemed illustrator John Tenniel was enlisted to produce the now-iconic illustrations for the work. Carroll made sure, though, that Tenniel would illustrate Alice just how she was described — meaning, barely. Alice, writes Kelly, is always written “in general terms so as not to distinguish her from any young girl... a nondescript Everygirl” (37-8); this was important because Carroll wished for all of his young girl readers to situate themselves in Alice’s adventures. Evidently, this worked: *Alice* became a worldwide success and has never been out of print. The book’s immediate popularity and mostly-glowing reviews prompted a reckoning in children’s literature, both from authors

who were inspired and authors who disliked Carroll's work, such as Christina Rossetti. Either way, its mark on all fantasy written thereafter is indelible.

### **Appendix B: George MacDonald & *The Princess and the Goblin***

George MacDonald was a prominent Scottish children's author in the Victorian era and even served as a mentor to Lewis Carroll, whom he encouraged to publish *Alice* when he read a draft in 1863 (Kelly 52). "MacDonald began his career as a Congregational minister," Ravenna Helson writes, "but he was a writer during most of his long life and is best known as a writer of serious fantasy" (74). He edited the children's periodical *Good Words for the Young* and often published his own work within it; this was how *The Princess and the Goblin* first entered the world. He is perhaps most famous for *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin*, and its sequel, *The Princess and the Curdie* (1883).

The first *Princess* book centers around Irene, a child princess of an unnamed kingdom, living in a "half castle, half farmhouse" situated in the country (MacDonald 1872; 1). Irene's father, the King, is often away from home to do business or fight battles, and her mother is presumably dead, though the occasion of her passing is never mentioned specifically. The King has ordered Irene's doting servants to never let her play outside past nightfall, for reasons unbeknownst to her until one fateful night when she and her nurse, Lootie, stray too far from home. The countryside where Irene lives is ravaged with nocturnal goblins, who serve as the antagonists of the text; during the day, the "cobs" are confined to underground mines, not far from where lower-class men work. When Irene and Lootie are lost, they meet a miner's son, Curdie, who tells them from his working experience that singing is what keeps goblins at bay, and his music ultimately leads them to safety. Irene promises Curdie a kiss of gratitude, but

Lootie does not allow her to follow through, saying “A princess mustn’t give kisses. It’s not at all proper... he’s only a miner-boy” (43). This is one of many instances of Irene’s title overshadowing her humanity.

Around this same time, Irene accidentally discovers a hidden staircase, at the top of which lives her great-great grandmother, who has magical powers. During one of Irene’s later visits, her grandmother presents her with a fire-opal ring, which is connected to an invisible string she wove from spider webs. She tells Irene to put the ring under her pillow if she ever feels frightened (MacDonald 116). Sure enough, Irene wakes in the middle of the night sometime later with a curious sense of fear — this coincides, unbeknownst to her, with Curdie having been captured by the goblins. Irene finds the invisible string and eventually frees Curdie from the goblins’ caves; the two children consult with Curdie’s parents and Irene’s grandmother and learn that the goblins are planning to siege the castle, so they plan a counterattack. Though many adults are involved — and the believability of young children is put to the test — it is Irene and Curdie who lead this fight.

The goblins are all male except for one, their Queen, who is the most evil of the bunch. She notably wears shoes, a fact which Irene notices during the battle in her home. When she is cornered by the Queen goblin, Curdie saves the day by crushing the Queen’s toes, which act as her Achilles’ heel. Though Curdie is the hero of the battle, Irene is the novel’s true heroine: her recognition of her own bravery and power outside of her title are what ultimately defeat the cob army. In the end, the king “commanded his servants to mind whatever Curdie should say to them” (MacDonald 1872; 233) — establishing the power a child may hold when they tell the truth — and the goblins flee the kingdom. MacDonald assures readers that the cobs have “all but disappeared,” explaining that “their skulls became softer as well as their hearts, and their feet

grew harde, and by degrees they became friendly with the inhabitants of the mountain and even with the miners” (235). Thus, the Princess and Curdie are left with a happy ending.

### **Appendix C: Christina Georgina Rossetti & *Speaking Likenesses***

Christina Georgina Rossetti was a known poet in Victorian England. She was close with her two brothers and her parents — *Speaking Likenesses* is dedicated to her mother — but never married. She is best remembered for the titular poem in her collection *Goblin Market and Other Stories* (1862), which scholars often link to commentary on Victorian gender roles; this was a common motif in her work. Knoepfmacher asserts that across her poetry collections, Rossetti “insists on the irreducible and inviolable selfhood of a femininity that resists its deformation into a type” (300). Rossetti also published *Sing-Song: A Nursery Rhyme Book* in 1872 with illustrations by Arthur Hughes, and was met with success; however, in this same year, reviewers “linked [*Sing-Song*] with the 1871 *Through the Looking-Glass*,” much to Rossetti’s dismay (Knoepfmacher 302). Rossetti knew Dodgson, and the tone of her letters to him suggests that she disliked him even before reading his work, which she saw as a male appropriation of a female narrative. In the wake of reading the *Alice* books, Rossetti set out to publish a work which commented directly on *Alice*’s fantasy elements and portrayal of girlhood: the result was an unusually negative children’s novella entitled *Speaking Likenesses*.

*Speaking Likenesses*, also illustrated by Hughes, is split into three sections, each defined by its heroine: the first is Flora, the second Edith, and the third Maggie. Each of these heroines ventures into a forest near their homes and somehow enters “Nowhere,” an antagonistic parallel to Wonderland. These stories are presented through a surrogate storyteller, an unnamed aunt, and frequent interruptions by her nieces, who are instructed to sew as they listen. These stories are

written as if they were created on the spot (like *Alice* was, originally), and each are connected by dialogue from the nieces: for example, the inspiration for Edith's story comes from a detail of Flora's, and Maggie's story is told because the nieces ask for a "winter story" (Rossetti 70). Flora's story, which sets up the entire book, illustrates a birthday party gone horribly wrong. Flora starts the day with her cousins, and none of them can seem to find any joy in the festivities. Flora wanders off, and ends up in Nowhere, at a dinner for the "Birthday Queen" full of monstrous child party guests. After being the subject of torment, Flora returns home as a much more well-behaved girl.

Edith's story follows, and is the least fantastic of the set. Edith, the youngest sibling in an upper class house, decides she would like to help her family and staff prepare for an event by making tea. She collects a kettle and matches and heads off to the forest to start a fire, somehow transitioning into Nowhere. She is joined by talking animals, though none are helpful when she wastes match after match — only a frog attempts to actually help, telling her that she needs to put water in her kettle first, but she does not listen. Upon using all her matches and ultimately failing, Edith falls asleep, and one of her family's staff eventually finds her. This story lacks almost any magic or even plot, and is made interesting when framed by Flora's and Maggie's bookending tales.

Maggie stands out among Rossetti's heroines because she is both lower-class and well-intentioned. She never strays from her path or her polite nature and never complains, despite her situation being dire in comparison to Flora's and Edith's lavish homes. Maggie's mission, from her shopkeeper grandmother, is to deliver goods to a doctor who lives deep into a forest, which transforms into Nowhere. Along the way, Maggie meets phantom children — quite similar to the children at the Birthday Queen's party — as well as a monstrous boy with a giant

mouth and no eyes and a group of sleepers. Instead of playing with the children, or giving into their requests for goods, Maggie continues on, hoping that the doctor will invite her inside to warm up before her return home. She spends the walk dreaming of the Christmas tree that sits in his living room; however, the doctor is cold, and does not offer her even a second of warm comfort. Maggie's story ends with her quick journey home, accompanied by several kind animals, and a happy reunion with her grandmother, one of the only morsels of joy in this dark work. Despite this light ending, Rossetti's work received mostly negative reviews and did not survive past one printing.

#### **Appendix D: Juliana Horatia Ewing & *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances***

Juliana Horatia Ewing was the daughter of esteemed children's author Margaret Gatty, who saw the potential in her daughter's stories early on. She took over editing *Aunt Judy's Magazine* after her mother's death in 1873 (Cashdan 217). Before taking over the magazine, though, Juliana moved to Canada with her husband, Alexander Ewing, who was in the British army (Sebag-Montefiore). It was overseas where she wrote *Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances*, which she published by sending each chapter off to her mother to print in *Aunt Judy's*. Throughout her life Mrs. Ewing was also almost always ill in some capacity, and after moving back to Europe never completed such a long journey again. When her husband was sent to Malta in 1879, for example, Juliana attempted the journey, but did not make it past France before her body proved too frail (Sebag-Montefiore 29). This setback prompted what Mary Sebag-Montefiore calls "the lowest phase of her life," and the loneliness this unknown illness brought her often seeped into her literary work.

*Mrs. Overtheway's Remembrances* is made up of four main stories, with an introductory chapter to establish context: mainly, that the heroine of the novel is Ida, a young orphan living amongst adults in her great uncle's mansion. The highlight of Ida's day is to watch her older neighbor, who she nicknames "Mrs. Overtheway" on account of her house being 'over the way,' walk to church each morning. Living with cold adults who do not understand children — even her nurse, who admonishes Ida while she plays, "Little girls shouldn't pretend what's not true" (Ewing 15) — Ida fixtates on her beautiful neighbor, whom she imagines to be loving and kind. In her loneliness, Ida imagines a wonderful life for Mrs. Overtheway, and one day decides that she would like to sneak out of her uncle's gardens to give her neighbor flowers. Though Ida's journey 'over the way' involves crossing a stream and ends up making her quite sick, it earns her a friendship with Mrs. Overtheway, who visits the orphan often to tell her stories.

Mrs. Overtheway's remembrances — her nonfiction stories about her childhood — grow in interest level to Ida as Ewing's novel progresses. The first, "Mrs. Moss," which details a young Mrs. O yearning to meet a friend of her mother's, puts Ida to sleep. The second, "The Snoring Ghost," is a ghost story about a short trip Mrs. O and her sister made when they were a bit older. The final story, clearly the most important to Mrs. O, is called "Reka Dom," and is told when Ida visits Mrs. O and asks about a house depicted in a painting on her wall. "Reka Dom" is also the story in which Mrs. O meets her husband, whom Ida later learns is dead, as are all of her siblings. This realization unites the pair in their shared loneliness, effectively building a small chosen family of two.

This is quickly dissolved, though, when Mrs. O comes to Ida with a fourth story, "Kerguelen's Land," the only fantasy of the bunch. Ida's father was lost at sea, which is why she lives an orphaned life with her great-uncle — however, after many months, he was finally

discovered on a desert island. Mrs. O was assigned to convey this message to Ida, which she did through a story of talking crows and dogs on a similar desert list. When Ida makes the connection, the pair cry tears of joy. Ida's father's return does separate her from Mrs. O, since she moves out of her uncle's home, but Mrs. Overthway reflects on her time with the heroine with joy. Though some readers wrote to *Aunt Judy's* asking for more of Mrs. Overthway's remembrances, Ewing was quite content with the tidy ending which she gave her story. *Mrs. Overthway's Remembrances* has long-since been out of print, but was popular and touching in its day.

#### **Appendix E: E. Nesbit & *The Story of the Treasure-Seekers***

E., or Edith Nesbit, was one of the most iconic authors of her day. She began publishing work in collaboration with her first husband, Hubert Bland, mostly poetry and short stories in periodicals such as *Nister's Holiday Annual* and *The Pall Mall Magazine* (Fitzsimons). Some chapters of her Bastable books — *Treasure Seekers* and its sequels, *The Wouldbegoods* (1901) and *The New Treasure Seekers* (1904) — were first published as standalone stories in this way, before she decided to write a collection of intentionally-ordered Bastable adventures. The final product, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, was serialized in *The Pall Mall Magazine* and *Windsor Magazine* in 1898 before its publication as a bound volume in 1899 (Moss 188). Many of her books, including the Bastable series, remain in print. Nesbit herself, as Anita Moss describes, was “an unconventional Bohemian who refused to wear corsets... rode the bicycle, jumped fences, smoked in public, adopted two of her husband's illegitimate children as her own [in addition to the three she gave birth to], and tolerated a highly unconventional household” (188). Her husband and frequent literary collaborator, however, was not at all a radical, and



despite Nesbit's continued support of him, his views reflected the nineteenth-century patriarchy for his entire life: he even (in)famously rejected suffrage by comparing women to both children and dogs when considering whether or not they deserved the right to vote (Jeikner 35).

Despite her tumultuous marriage, Nesbit remained faithful to Hubert until his death, and her novels remained cheerful, brought financial success, and did not shy from difficult topics.

The Bastable books follow the six Bastable siblings — Dora, Oswald, Dicky, Alice, Noël, and H. O. — as well as their neighbor Albert-next-door, on a mission to restore their family's fortunes. After their mother's death, their father's business loses a lot of its money; this is why the children do not go to school, though they do have a governess, Eliza. Following the opening episode in which the siblings dig up a couple coins in their backyard, the children begin to brainstorm how they can earn money: the antics they get up to include selling bottles of wine sweetened with sugar, writing a newspaper, marrying Noël to a princess, and inventing a new medicine. None of these adventures yield more than a bit of extra cash, but the children nonetheless have fun and stick to it. The story ends when their mother's brother, who lives India, comes to visit their father, who is hoping to ask for money. Their uncle refuses to offer financial support and the children assume he is poor; that being the case, they invite him to play with them so they can get to know him. The uncle is so touched by the kindness of the children to include him in their game, he reveals that he is, in fact, rich, and invites the children to live with him in his mansion, acting as, in Oswald's words, their "Fairy Godmother" (Nesbit 1899; 229).

#### **Appendix F: Frances Hodgson Burnett & *The Secret Garden***

Frances Hodgson Burnett was an English children's author who bounced between the country of her birth and the United States for most of her life. She is best known for *A Little*

*Princess* (1905) and *The Secret Garden*, two works of realistic fiction with fantasy elements which feature heroines who move from India to the U.K. Burnett first moved to the United States in her teenage years, and she began to publish short fiction in periodicals to make money for her family (Sebag-Montefiore 69). When her mother died in 1870, Burnett became the primary breadwinner of her house, making all of her money through writing (Parsons 250). She moved to Paris with her first husband, Swan Burnett, and remained an avid writer; she paid for her husband's ophthalmology training abroad and supported their two sons while he struggled to find success (Sebag-Montefiore 70). After years of frustration and frequent bouts with depression, Frances divorced Swan in 1898; her next marriage, to an actor who took roles in her plays, lasted only two years (Parsons). Linda Parsons writes that Burnett's unsuccessful marriages "led her to be impatient with, hostile toward, and resentful of male weakness," a feeling which permeates her later novels (251).

As an independent and successful woman, Frances maintained homes in America and England, the latter of which being where she wrote *The Secret Garden*. Her tenacity was known throughout the literary world; when, for example, an unauthorized theatrical adaptation of her novel *Little Lord Fauntleroy* was produced, "she quickly wrote her own very successful *The Real Little Lord Fauntleroy*, sued the playwright, and won her case, thus prompting the Copyright Act of 1911" (Sebag-Montefiore 73). According to Parsons, "between 1877 and 1925, Frances published approximately 59 books and wrote 13 plays," many of which are still known today (251-2). Burnett was the sole driver of her success and served as an example of the power a woman could wield in a man's world.

The heroine of *The Secret Garden*, Mary, is also an example of female grit. Mary's name is borrowed from the English nursery rhyme "Mary, Mary, quite contrary," which makes an appearance early in the novel:

Mistress Mary, quite contrary,  
How does your garden grow?  
With silver bells, and cockle shells,  
And marigolds all in a row. (Burnett 11)

Children tease Mary with this nursery rhyme because of her "contrariness:" she is described from early on in the novel as an angry and ugly child who hits her nurses and has an almost nonexistent relationship with her parents. When almost all members of her house — including her parents — die of a cholera outbreak, Mary must move to England to live with her uncle, who is cold and distant. While living in Misselthwaite Manor, Mary learns from her maid, Martha, that her uncle's wife died in an accident in a garden, to which he has buried the only key, which explains his depression. Mary finds the key to the secret garden with the help of a friendly robin, and sets off to help it come alive again. She enlists the help of Martha's brother Dickon, a happy young boy who can charm animals, and together they revitalize the space. In the process, Mary begins to play, gains weight and color in her cheeks, and transforms into a happy child.

About halfway through the book, Mary hears an awful crying noise echoing through Misselthwaite. Against Martha's warnings, Mary investigates, and soon finds a bedridden boy her age, hidden in a dark bedroom. This is her cousin Colin, locked away because he reminds his father of his late mother, and because of his mysterious, debilitating illness. Colin himself is also quite contrary, but Mary uses her newfound power over her emotions to put his behavior in check, much to the servants' delight. She helps him find joy by telling him stories about India and the secret garden, which he hopes to see one day. Soon, she and Dickon (and Dickon's animals) take Colin to the garden, where he learns to run and play just like Mary did. The novel

ends with Colin's father discovering Colin and Mary running a footrace in the garden, astonished to see his son smiling and running. Colin, calling the energy of the garden "Magic," walks off with his father to tell him all about his new lease on life, which Mary helped cultivate. Although Mary is largely absent from this resolution, she is still a heroine in every right: as Debbie Lelekis writes, "Mary is important as a character who is setting the stage for future female fictional characters who are able to be powerful in less subtle ways" (Lelekis 70).

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