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

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### Abstract

This essay uncovers the links between *The Secret Garden* and the venerable shrewtaming tradition. Reading the plot as a double story of shrew-taming, the essay addresses why so many readers who remember the novel fondly also forget its conclusion in order to resist the operations of its plot.

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

Frances E. Dolan

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

Many fans of *The Secret Garden* have felt a sense of loss as Mary's character dwindles and Colin's achieves ascendancy—thanks to her efforts. Critics who attend to the book's analogs have labored to contextualize and thus explain and ameliorate its narrative arc, connecting the novel to sources as surprising, at first glance, as Virgil's *Georgics*, as well as to those to which the text itself announces its debts, including Burnett's other books, earlier sentimental fiction for and about children, fairy tales, and especially *Jane Eyre*.<sup>1</sup> Like Jane, Mary secures many readers' identification and attachment through the very qualities that supposedly make her "unattractive": her ire, her isolation and independence, her insubordination, and her self-possession.

In this essay, I will argue that these very characteristics link Mary to the "shrew," the disorderly character dating back at least as far as Socrates's wife Xantippe, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and Noah's wife in medieval drama. The shrew is a stock character in medieval as well as early modern popular culture, and she persists as a recognizable type into the present. In the sixteenth century, the identifying features of the shrew became codified (see Boose; Bradbrook; Brown; Dolan; Wayne; and Woodbridge). These features include defiant self-assertion; insubordination; a questing, intrusive curiosity; an irritable sense of grievance and inclination to quarrel; and physical violence. While violence is sometimes used or threatened as part of the process of taming the



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