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Cultivating Mary: The Victorian Secret Garden

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Cultivating Mary: The Victorian Secret Garden

Danielle E. Price (bio)

At the beginning of Francis Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), the narrative voice informs us that nine-year-old Mary Lennox is not only

"the most disagreeable-looking child ever seen," but "as tyrannical and selfish a little pig as ever lived" (9-10).¹ Orphaned by a cholera epidemic in India, Mary must live at Misselthwaite manor, her uncle's Yorkshire estate. The omniscient narrator of Burnett's novel, while ostensibly recording Mary's transformation from "selfish pig" to caring cousin, participates from the beginning in an imperialist discourse by bestowing on Mary the same bestial insult that she bestows on her Indian servants. And, when Mary enters the secret garden, her story becomes further entangled in the thorny issues of gender, class, and imperialism.

The most important essays on *The Secret Garden* have separated these terms. Critics such as Phyllis Bixler, Elizabeth Lennox Keyser, and Anna Krugovov Silver have produced feminist studies of *The Secret Garden* which explore domesticity and mothering, but ignore the increasingly urgent burden of feminism today: the global significance of gender relations at home.² Jerry Phillips, by contrast, provides an excellent discussion of "blowback," the disruptive effects of returning colonialists, but does not consider Mary Lennox as a gendered subject.³ My own reading of *The Secret Garden* stresses the intimate connection between gender, class, and imperialism. *The Secret Garden* is a novel that only could be nurtured in the late nineteenth century and brought to fruition at the beginning of the twentieth century—a time when interest in gardens reached a frenzy, when gender roles were being hotly contested, and when England was adjusting to the return of its colonizing subjects.

While the young Mary cultivates a secret garden, her work in this maternal space disciplines her. In the Yorkshire mansion and on its grounds, Mary takes the first steps toward proper girlhood and womanhood. She will trade her sickness for health, her yellow skin for white, her Indian nature for an English one. This metamorphosis is accompanied by—in fact, is inseparable from—the Indian-born Mary's inculcation in English ways and values. Plunging her hands into English soil becomes a cure for creolization. As we shall see, Mary's cultivation follows the steps of nineteenth-century garden theorists in their plans for the

perfect garden: namely, enclosure, imprisonment, instruction, and beautification. Although Mary does not easily relinquish her wildness, she becomes a girl who, like the ideal garden, can provide both beauty and comfort, and who can cultivate her male cousin, the young patriarch-in-training. The text, therefore, establishes a crucial itinerary, in which, step by step, the development of a young girl is used to further male power.

The Garden and the Lady

The Victorian love affair with flowers was manifested in activities both at home and abroad.⁴ In domestic and national spaces, the Victorians planted roses, sold lilies, and exhibited pansies. They adorned their buttonholes with carnations, their hair with camellias, their homes with chrysanthemums. Abroad, they tramped through such places as the jungles of South America to collect the flower they worshipped—the orchid. They displayed their exotic findings at Kew Gardens (established in 1759, but made public in 1840), where the Palm House (1848) and the Temperate House (1899) stood as vivid reminders of the reach of the English imperial hand and its power to put the foreign on display.

Victorian industry, moreover, produced the myriad products necessary to support this hobby and business, as well as the magazines that disseminated information on the topic. By 1880, there were more than ten newspapers and periodicals devoted to horticulture, and, in the same year, the *Quarterly Review* proclaimed that "never, perhaps, was the art of gardening so popular" ("[English Flower](#)" 331). Gardeners benefited from the inventions of the Industrial Revolution and demanded new and improved products. Victorians invented the lawnmower, developed the process for making sheet glass used in greenhouses, and refined the techniques and equipment for transplanting and transporting plants.⁵ As in many depictions of Victorian life—J. M. W. Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed* (1844) is perhaps...

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The factory of the Industrial Revolution produced, alongside its time-saving inventions, blackened landscapes and crowded cities and thus increased the nostalgia for England's green and rural past. The value of the lawn and garden, and the suburban house attached to them, became ever more symbolic and important. Although this desire for the pastoral is centuries old, as Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City* (1958), "it gained new urgency during the nineteenth century, when England became an industrial and urban nation. The desire for the pastoral flourished in the midst of dingy cities." Thus, Victorian industry not only created smoggy cities, but also a



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