

## Brontë and Burnett: A Response to Susan E. James\*

LISA TYLER

The Romantic influences on Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 children's novel *The Secret Garden* are evident and have been well documented. These influences include the attention and prominence given to child characters,<sup>1</sup> Burnett's use of the Western tradition of the literary pastoral,<sup>2</sup> and what Burnett critics identify as the Wordsworthian notion that children are closer to nature,<sup>3</sup>—a notion perhaps more accurately attributed to Rousseau and Goethe. In her 1974 biography of Frances Hodgson Burnett, Ann Thwaite devotes a paragraph to the parallels between *The Secret Garden* and *Jane Eyre* (220-21), which she describes as too close to be coincidental, and in a 1975 bibliographical survey of Burnett's work, Francis J. Molson called for critics to establish the "extent of Burnett's debt to Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë" (41). Phyllis Bixler, the best authority on Burnett's writings, has devoted several paragraphs to spelling out that debt and its significance (*Frances* 99), as well as briefly alluding to the possible influence of *Jane Eyre* on Burnett's other writings (*Frances* 125).

"More than one scholar has identified and described 'the echoes of *Jane Eyre* in *The Secret Garden*' but the contribution of *Wuthering Heights* has been less recognized," Susan E. James accurately observes in explaining her own project. Typical is Humphrey Carpenter's mention, in passing, that "there is a good deal of allusion to the wind 'wuthering' round the manor; the country lad Dickon, who becomes Mary's friend and helper, is a kind of Heathcliff-gone-right" (188-89). Elizabeth Lennox Keyser went a bit farther, albeit in a footnote, men-

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\*Reference: Susan E. James, "Wuthering Heights for Children: Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*," *Connotations* 10.1 (2000/2001): 59-76.

tioning first similarities of setting, and then adding, "Mary has elements of Jane Eyre and both Catherines, Dickon resembles a more benign little Heathcliff, and Colin seems a blend of Rochester, Linton Heathcliff, and Hareton Earnshaw" (13n10). The comparison between Dickon and Heathcliff may admittedly seem a bit farfetched, but Mary certainly is an orphan, like Jane Eyre, and shares that character's courage and inquisitiveness. Like the first Catherine, she loves the freedom of being outdoors, and like the second, she willingly socializes the young man who needs her help because of parental neglect. Colin has Rochester's temper, Linton Heathcliff's sickliness, and Hareton Earnshaw's willingness to be tutored. While the characters and plot developments differ dramatically, certain themes from the Brontës' novels do seem to recur in Burnett's. Anna Krugovoy Silver has done the most extensive work comparing *Wuthering Heights* and *The Secret Garden*, suggesting that Burnett replaces the purely nominal mother-and-child relationship of Catherine and her daughter with "the primacy of the maternal bond" (193). Noting the parallels to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* developed by earlier critics (e.g. Verduin and Plotz), Bixler comments on the sexual undercurrents of Burnett's novel in *The Secret Garden: Nature's Magic*:

A heroine who divides her attention between an eroticized lower-class male and an attenuated upper-class male has occurred elsewhere in British fiction. An earlier example of this character triad had been provided by Catherine, Heathcliff, and Edgar, who, along with their Yorkshire moors in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), doubtless influenced Burnett consciously or unconsciously in writing *The Secret Garden*. (56)

In her delightful essay, James develops our understanding of this influence. The most surprising and convincing element of her argument lies in her persuasive comparisons of characters in both novels: the hot-tempered orphans Mary Lennox and Heathcliff, the brooding adult Heathcliff and the grief-tormented Archibald Craven, and the sickly and effete aristocratic children, Linton Heathcliff and Colin Craven.

Perhaps the least compelling elements of James's essay are her textual comparisons, in which passages from both works are placed side by side. While the language is at times similar, the parallels she develops between the characters and situations in the two novels are ultimately more effective. Also troubling is her dismissal of the moors as a setting in the later writer's work. "For Burnett in *The Secret Garden*, the moors are a place described but never experienced first-hand," writes James (61). But elsewhere Burnett *did* show a heroine with personal experience of the moors, albeit Scottish ones—in *The White People*, her 1917 novella of the supernatural at least partly inspired by her sense that her beloved son Lionel, dead of tuberculosis at 15, was still with her in spirit. In that work as well, however, "Burnett sentimentalizes the otherworldly," as James observes of *The Secret Garden* (69).

As is typical of the best literary criticism, James's article stimulates thought and suggests further parallels to develop. It would be interesting to compare both novels as what Barbara and Richard Almond term "therapeutic narratives." Claudia Marquis, who offers a psychoanalytic reading of Burnett's novel, has suggested that Mary acts "as analyst to Colin's analysand" (178). The Almonds have demonstrated that *The Secret Garden* is an insightful portrayal of psychological healing, Gillian Adams has looked at the healing power of secrets, and Madelon S. Gohlke has written movingly of the novel's contribution to her own recovery from grief after her father's sudden accidental death. Similarly, William A. Madden has offered an analysis of *Wuthering Heights* in terms of Freudian trauma theory, contending "the double drama of *Wuthering Heights* has provided the powerful experience of living through the same potentially traumatic circumstances, once ending in tragedy, but the second time with the energy bound and channeled into human wholeness and love through the transforming power of a love that both understands and forgives" (154).

Trysh Travis has noted (with some dismay) her students' uncritical adoption of the pop-psychology terminology of what Travis calls the

"recovery movement" to understand *Wuthering Heights*; the title of her article is "Heathcliff and Cathy, the Dysfunctional Couple." More persuasively than Travis's students, Eric P. Levy suggests that the characters of Brontë's novel were all either neglected or spoiled, and that their adult behaviors reflect their childhood experiences of being either starved for love or lavished with excessive attention: "In one family, the implied message transmitted to the child might be rendered as 'You don't belong here'; in the other, 'You're too weak ever to leave'" (159). In *The Secret Garden*, Mary has received the first message, Colin the second.

The disturbing eclipse of Mary in favor of Colin in *The Secret Garden*, a switch that bothers many of the novel's women readers,<sup>4</sup> bears certain parallels to Catherine's death and Heathcliff's domination of the remaining family members in *Wuthering Heights*. Consider Danielle E. Price's observation: "Mary is forgotten in what becomes a story of father and son, and we remember, if we had ever forgotten, who owns and who will own all the gardens on the estate" (11). The class dynamics of both works might also merit comparison. Both works contrast the emotional honesty, passionate warmth, and powerful personalities of characters associated with Yorkshire and the chilly, unhealthy characters who circulate in the society beyond—although in Brontë's novel, only the Yorkshire *gentry* are attractive; the servants, unlike the idealized Sowerbys of *The Secret Garden*, can be frightening in their malevolence. It would be interesting to analyze *Wuthering Heights* in light of Jerry Phillips's essay on the class politics of *The Secret Garden*.

It has been suggested that in her novel Brontë draws on the "primitive energies of childhood" (Oates 65), and thus that our own perhaps subconscious memories of childhood rage and the other primal emotions of the nursery account for at least part of the intensity and impact of *Wuthering Heights*. Yet, although appropriately drawing on those same intense emotions in a work of children's literature, Burnett mutes their impact, showing the children in rages and tantrums that are comic rather than frightening. Unlike Brontë, Burnett was ulti-

mately less interested in ugly emotions than in socially acceptable and aesthetically pleasing ones. One senses that she wished to evade the feelings invoked by the more painful experiences in her own life—her two unhappy marriages, and the loss of her son Lionel to tuberculosis, diagnosed just nine months before his death. Perhaps because of such deeply painful experiences, she seems primarily interested in people who were successfully able to achieve self-control. As she once told her son, “with the best that was in me, I have tried to write more happiness into the world” (Bixler, *Frances* 71).

Sinclair Community College  
Dayton, Ohio

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bixler, *Frances* 1, *Secret* 3; Phillips 176-77.

<sup>2</sup>Bixler, *Secret* 17; Evans 20-24.

<sup>3</sup>Bixler, *Secret* 6; Phillips 175-80.

<sup>4</sup>Bixler, “Misread” 110; Keyser 2-3, 12; Knoepfmacher 24-25.

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