Images of Mother Monarch Queen Victoria in Victorian Children’s Literature

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Images of Queen Victoria (r. 1837-1901) permeate Victorian children’s literature. In particular, Victorian authors were drawn to the same characteristics of the Queen that intrigue us today: her paradoxes. Contradictions abound, but all converge on a single dichotomy embodied by the Queen: the maternal monarch. Queen Victoria “intertwine[ed] power and subjection,” displaying a distinctly female identity which undercut the threat she posed to the male-dominant Parliament while fostering an image of herself as mother of the nation that gave her a power with which no male could contend.¹ A force under which the British nation could regain a sense of unity even as industrialism and imperialism challenged traditional notions of family life and national identity, Queen Victoria “represented all women”² and a motherhood that extended beyond her person, across boundaries of time and space. In this way, the Queen empowered Victorian women, suggesting that they were the nurturers of the nation, at the same time that she undermined their individuality, thereby erasing women from history.

Many Victorian children’s novels reflect the dual image of Queen Victoria, exploring the notion of the nurturing mother, who provides her children with a home in which they can grow up yet is simultaneously marginalized or otherwise deprived of power and agency. This essay will focus primarily on female characters in Frances Hodgson Burnett’s The Secret Garden and

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as a means of introducing representations of the ideal Victorian woman’s paradoxical possession of both maternal and queenly traits in children’s novels of the period. In particular, Susan Sowerby and the Queen of Hearts will be considered as successful and unsuccessful portrayals of the mother monarch. In addition, an analysis of Alice and Mary Lennox will reveal how young girls become part of the “community of mothers”

3 to which all mother figures belong, and, in junction, the role of the garden as a space that represents that collective motherhood will be discussed.

*The Secret Garden*’s main mother figure, Susan Sowerby, symbolizes the epitomical Victorian mother: the powerless housewife who becomes an empowered queen.4 Not only does Mrs. Sowerby have complete control and knowledge within her own home, managing Martha’s earning, feeding the children, and more, but her power also extends into the public sphere. Mrs. Medlock and Mr. Craven, for example, seek and accept the lower-class housewife’s advice on Mary Lennox’s upbringing. In this way, Mrs. Sowerby represents the middle-class women who formed the backbone of British society during the rapid industrialization of the Victorian era. Despite her royal status, Queen Victoria tried to adopt the identity of a middle-class mother, upholding the middle class as the ideal British citizen, perhaps recognizing the importance of the middle class, particularly of the women, who were crucial for the nation’s persistence and the production of good, moral British citizens. Thus, Mrs. Sowerby not only

4 Sharon Aronofsky Weltman, “‘Be no more housewives, but queens’: Queen Victoria and Ruskin’s domestic mythology,” in *Remaking Queen Victoria,* eds. Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 105.
directly represents a large population of Victorian women, but also alludes to the Queen and, by extension, all Victorian women.

Just like Queen Victoria, Mrs. Sowerby is everywhere and nowhere at once. She is continually mentioned in conversations between Mary and Martha and later between Mary and Colin, and Mrs. Sowerby has a strong presence in Mary’s psyche, though she does not actually appear until the second to last chapter of the novel. Queen Victoria was a similarly distant figure, living in a world untouched and untouchable by most of her subjects. Despite the ubiquity of her image and her mother identity, the Queen was not accessible to the public. This distance, however, contributed to the idealization of Queen Victoria, just as Mrs. Sowerby’s lack of physical presence allows Mary and Colin to idealize her, thereby making their relationships with her feel even more intimate, as each imagines a woman who embodies all that they desire in a mother.

Omniscient, omnipresent and omnibenevolent, Mrs. Sowerby is almost deified, and when the idolized mother finally appears, her divinity is reinforced by her blue cloak, symbolic of the Madonna (159). Naturally, another paradox arises with this reference, as Mrs. Sowerby’s heightened motherliness, developed through her image as mother of twelve offspring and her deep knowledge of child-rearing, clashes with the image of the Virgin evoked here and is supported by the absence of Mr. Sowerby throughout the entire novel. Nevertheless, the Virgin is a fitting parallel, for Mrs. Sowerby, as a representation of the ideal mother, of a collective maternal identity that unites Britain, just as Queen Victoria did, represents the motherhood that

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5 Brown, “The Influence of Queen Victoria,” 41.
bred all good, moral British citizens. The Madonna may be seen as the original mother of that collective identity and the role model of motherhood, as she gave birth to the first Christian man and son of God, Christ. The Madonna imagery also recalls Queen Victoria, who was not eroticized despite her astounding procreativity (she had nine healthy children—a confounding statistic for the time).

Consistent with Mrs. Sowerby’s maternal holiness is her role as guide and nurturer of the children, particularly Mary, who strives to follow Mrs. Sowerby’s wishes. For example, Mary takes to heart Mrs. Sowerby’s declaration (as related by Martha) that “Nothin’ will do her more good than skippin’ rope” (43) and jumps rope at length around the garden. As a result, Mary gains physical, mental, and emotional strength, demonstrating the crucial influence mothers have in children’s development.

Mrs. Sowerby’s sacred “power to heal, to redeem, to guide, and to guard” also underlies the maternal quality that is the basis of her power. Just as Queen Victoria acquired her power “by appearing not to rule,” emphasizing her motherly qualities over her monarchical ones, so does Mrs. Sowerby rule from behind a veil of female domesticity.

Nevertheless, both rule. Phyllis Bixler’s observation that “In The Secret Garden, effective motherhood means giving children tools to help themselves” parallels the insistence of Mother

6 Homans, Royal Representations, 4.
Carey (one of the mother figures in Charles Kingsley’s *The Water-Babies*) that she does not create beasts, but “make[s] [new beasts] make themselves” (196), thereby guiding their self-creation as Mrs. Sowerby guides Mary and Colin’s maturation and as Queen Victoria guides the nation’s development. Central to these processes is the notion of food as physical, mental, and spiritual nutriment. By sending the children baskets of food, Mrs. Sowerby feeds the children’s growth just as Queen Victoria fed the nation through such means as her jubilee public feasts. Mother figures in these Victorian novels are, therefore, not explicit authoritarians, but nurturers who covertly inspire self-creation.

While Mrs. Sowerby exemplifies the quintessential housewife empowered by her maternal nature, the Queen of Hearts in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* represents dysfunctional, powerless matriarchy. Carroll explores a female monarch who rejects maternal and feminine traits, thereby compromising her authority. The Queen of Hearts demonstrates that embracing the maternal image is crucial for the establishment and maintenance of the sovereignty of female rulers and, moreover, that the mother identity is the source of female power.

Like Mrs. Sowerby, the Queen of Hearts is omnipresent in that she is a constant topic of conversation, but in reality she exists in a world removed (i.e., the garden), disconnected from Alice and many of the other characters in Wonderland for much of the book. Unlike Mrs. Sowerby, however, the Queen of Hearts is not omniscient and omnibenevolent, but a cruel and 

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unknowledgeable “power figure without power.”  

Despite the fear she elicits in her subjects, her endless commands (most of which call for someone’s decapitation, even if no crime has been committed), and her title of “Queen,” the Queen of Hearts is never obeyed, rendering the fear, her commands, and her title meaningless, and hence her character absurd. In this way, Carroll appears to deconstruct and mock notions of royalty and the attribution of power. Upon meeting the Queen of Hearts, Alice observes, “Why, they’re only a pack of cards, after all. I needn’t be afraid of them!” (122) in much the same way one could argue that the King and Queen of England are just people, so why should they be granted more authority than others? Alice quickly uncovers the impotency of the Queen when she renders the Queen’s command “Off with her head!” futile by pronouncing a single word—“Nonsense!” (123)—thus discovering the ridiculous truth of the situation: that the Queen is powerless and her commands, meaningless. Consequently, Alice metaphorically replaces the Queen of Hearts as the dominant figure.  

The transformation of Alice into a queen becomes literal in Carroll’s sequel, Through the Looking Glass.

This is not the first subversion of traditional power constructs in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. The King and Queen of Hearts are themselves unconventional in that the former is feminized and the latter, masculinized. The Queen of Hearts frequently loses her temper, is belligerent, and orders death sentences, performing masculinity in its extreme. Furthermore, the Queen’s act of sentencing her daughter, the Duchess, to death may be interpreted as an attempt to fully erase her maternal image. In contrast to his wife, the King of Hearts adopts

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14 Homans, Royal Representations, 91.
more feminine attributes. For example, he remains calm and rarely talks, let alone gives orders. Moreover, during the trial (the one scene in which he does talk) the King of Hearts expresses a womanly delicacy when he tells his wife, “Really, my dear, you must cross-examine the next witness. It quite makes my forehead ache!” (151). The secondary, feminized position of the King of Hearts and assertive, masculinized disposition of the Queen of Hearts vaguely mirror the relationship of Prince Albert and Queen Victoria.\textsuperscript{15} Importantly, however, the Queen of Hearts, unlike Queen Victoria, does not express any maternal qualities. Thus, it appears that the mother identity that Queen Victoria carefully fostered was not at odds with, but fundamental to her power.

This theory is supported not only by Susan Sowerby, but also by another mother figure within \textit{Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland}: Alice herself. Though she is a young girl, Alice displays many of the characteristics of a mother, and thus her maternal nature and consequent power challenges, juxtaposes, and critiques the Queen of Hearts’ anti-maternal disposition and resulting impotence. While Alice harbors Queen Victoria’s paradoxical mother and ruler images, she is not the pure, innocent mother figure that Susan Sowerby represents, but instead exhibits both maternal and aggressive traits.

Alice’s maternal instincts are revealed primarily in the way she “mothers” the animals in Wonderland, such as when she scolds the Duchess’ baby for grunting, telling it “that’s not at all a proper way of expressing yourself” (107). These instincts, however, contrast with Alice’s cruelty, evident, for example, when she kicks the chimney as the lizard is coming down it. Seen

\textsuperscript{15} Because he was not English, Prince Albert’s masculinity was undermined, as is evident in his lesser title, lack of power, and general invisibility in comparison to English kings and even his wife, Queen Victoria. See Munich, “Good and Plenty,” 267-268 for a brief, though not complete, discussion of Prince Albert’s inferior position.
more broadly, Alice is both creator and destroyer.\textsuperscript{16} Alice possesses these opposing powers throughout the book, from her fabrication of Wonderland through her imagination to her dissolution of the realm with the simple exclamation “You’re nothing but a pack of cards!” (158). Alice’s exercise of these complementary strengths demonstrates the ultimate dominance of the matriarch, who has both the power of the mother to create and the power of the ruler to destroy. Though Alice may not be an ideal queen, as is the motherly and nonaggressive Mrs. Sowerby, she may be a more realistic one.

By no means does this mean that Carroll intended Alice to be a realistic (as opposed to idealized) representation of Queen Victoria, but Alice was clearly meant to be a believable character with a unique, relatable personality as opposed to a romanticized, mythical figure. Nevertheless, parallels between Alice and Queen Victoria indicate that Alice may have been modeled after the Queen in some respects, at least. Most notably, the allusion to the ascendancy of the mother is one that Queen Victoria herself embodied. Specifically, Alice represents the empowerment of middle-class women, as she is originally a housemaid in Wonderland, sent by the White Rabbit to fetch his gloves, and metaphorically metamorphoses into a queen when she defies the Queen of Hearts. As mentioned earlier, while this transformation is figurative in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, it is literal in Through the Looking Glass, when Alice, a pawn, captures the Red Queen in a game of chess to become a queen and checkmate the Red King. Thus, the sequel explicitly demonstrates Alice’s dominance over both queen and king, and, by extension, the mother’s regal power over both the unmaternal female and the male.

\textsuperscript{16} Brown, “The Influence of Queen Victoria,” 45.
Another correspondence between Alice and Queen Victoria is each figure’s purposeful manipulation of her image. Alice frequently changes her size to suit her purposes under the given circumstances, just as Queen Victoria tailored her public appearance to convey particular images of herself to particular audiences.\textsuperscript{17} Despite her constant modifications of size and shape, however, Alice mentally remains in a “state of undifferentiation.”\textsuperscript{18} Even as her physical appearance alters, Alice remains the same person, her character does not develop, and she does not mature. Likewise, Queen Victoria arguably changed little over the course of her reign, for the Queen, as a representation of the British state, is supposedly unchanging, as “state” comes from the latin word “stare” meaning “to stand,” or not move or change.\textsuperscript{19} The nation’s maintenance of a core identity parallels the fixity of the communal motherhood that the Queen also represented. Thus, the Queen’s maternal and stately images both give rise to a sense of underlying stasis, of an underlying national identity that endures as surface-level changes take place, unifying the nation in a time of dramatic change. Thus, the course of the nation is comparable to Alice’s growth and shrinkage, which does not alter the young girl’s core self.

The manner in which girls grow into mothers is also manifested in the character of Mary Lennox,\textsuperscript{20} who develops from a mean, aggressive, self-involved, self-important, demanding child (a little reminiscent of the Queen of Hearts) into a kind, affectionate girl who helps heal a sickly young boy. Just like Alice, Mary’s transformation into a queenly mother takes place in a garden—a space that represents the home, the womb, motherhood, the nation, and Queen

\textsuperscript{17} For details on the way Queen Victoria portrayed herself to the public throughout her reign, see Susan P. Casteras’s critical essay “The wise child and her ‘offspring’: some changing faces of Queen Victoria,” in *Remaking Queen Victoria*, eds. Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 182-199.

\textsuperscript{18} Brown, “The Influence of Queen Victoria,” 45.


\textsuperscript{20} Bixler, “Gardens, Houses, and Nurturant Power,” 292.
Victoria. Once developed, Mary’s motherly nature gives her nurturing powers much like those of Susan Sowerby, and, in a larger context, Queen Victoria.

Mary brings affection, comfort, and hope to her sickly cousin, Colin, thereby filling the role of Colin’s absent mother and helping Colin overcome his fear of death and restore himself to good health. Mary and the garden, two motherly entities that are in many ways inseparable, penetrate Misselthwaite Manor. Mary explores empty rooms in the house, finally happening upon Colin, who has been stowed away like many of the manor’s other neglected objects. Mary simultaneously heals Colin and transforms the manor into a home, a “shelter, not only from all injury, but from terror, doubt, and division.” By the end of the novel, Colin lives in good health, is free of his original fears, and does not doubt that he will live. Moreover, the divisions between the different classes, spaces, and family members that once marked the manor have been erased. In the final few pages of the book, the gardener, Ben Weatherstaff, is invited into the manor for the first time, signifying the complete breaking down of the divisions between the garden and the manor’s interior that began with earlier events, such as Dickon and the animals entering the house. Ben’s invitation into the manor also signals the eradication of divisions between the different classes of servants at the manor, and an environment more like that of the garden, where upper-class Mary and Colin and lower-middle-class Dickon and Ben treat each other nearly as equals. In addition, Colin is reunited with his father, for now that Colin has been reared by a mother figure who provided Colin with the maternal body that Mr. Craven could not supply and now that the manor has become a home, the father and son can have a true familial relationship.

21 Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens.”
The secret garden is crucial to Mary’s maturation into a mother figure. It is, in many ways, her teacher, her guide, her role model. Lacking a mother herself, Mary is attracted to places that offer the safety and comfort that characterize the womb, the mother, and the home (for the home is wherever the mother is). The garden is such a place, and, in that respect, it is itself a mother figure. More specifically, however, the garden is a place where all the mother figures in the novel—namely Mrs. Sowerby, Mrs. Craven, Dickon, and Mary—converge, and thus the lush garden is a visual representation of the collective “community of mothers” that extends beyond the mothers within the book to include all British mothers, Queen Victoria, and the mother nation as a whole.

When Mary first finds the secret garden, she is afraid that it is dead, wasted away after years of abandonment. Mary’s maternal instincts quickly emerge, and, although “she [does] not know anything about gardening,” she starts pulling the weeds to give the flowers more room to “breathe” (48). As Mary’s maternal, nurturing tendencies develop, the garden revives, suggesting that motherhood has power over time. Mary also wards off death in Colin, just as the garden and Mrs. Sowerby revitalize Mary, who comes to the manor emaciated, cruel, ugly, and rather deathlike herself. A womb-like refuge from the external world, the maternal body is a life-giving force that exists atemporally. Whenever Mary enters the motherly garden, she forgets time, as Colin does when Mary is with him. Similarly, Susan Sowerby’s eternal presence in the children’s minds allows her to become an almost mythic figure who will thus live on forever in legend. In addition, Mrs. Sowerby is an image of enduring youthfulness, both with her “comfortable rosy face” (161) and through her link to the Madonna (virginity is associated

22 Ruskin, “Of Queens’ Gardens.”
with youth). For Alice, Wonderland is a place where time stops—where the Rabbit no longer worries about being late, from where Alice may return without finding that time has progressed in the Victorian world above. Thus all these mother figures appear to have an atemporal quality.

In this way, the mother figures are closely linked to Queen Victoria yet again, for the idea that the mother figure exists outside the control of time has critical implications for Britain under the rule of the maternal monarch. Just as Bixler’s “community of mothers” is visually represented by the secret garden, so is it embodied by the Queen of England, the mother nation, whose very being is synonymous with the English land. As the image of collective motherhood, of all British mothers throughout the eras and across the globe, Queen Victoria transcended time and space. In this way, the Queen unified the British people by creating a sense of continuity at a time when industrialism and imperialism were introducing rapid and dramatic changes that challenged established notions of national identity. The Queen promoted the image of the nation as a family, uniting the British people as “the children of one Mother” and asserting the perpetuity of the British nation. Queen Victoria’s “obstinate longevity” supported this image of the continuous national family, for her reign of over sixty years “engorged generations of men and the collective shocks of history,” substantiating her image as the perpetual mother of Britain and Britain’s image as an enduring nation.

This conception of a collective motherhood visually represented by Queen Victoria and adopted by many Victorian children’s novelists empowered Victorian women by honoring

23 Munich, “Good and Plenty,” 17.
24 Munich, “Good and Plenty,” 16.
mothers as the backbone of the British nation. Furthermore, it gave women, confined to the
domestic sphere more than ever because of changes in family life that took place as a result of
the Industrial Revolution, a public presence through Queen Victoria. Yet while this notion
empowered mothers as a collective identity, it subjugated them further as individuals, for the
importance of the collective motherhood undermined each woman’s individuality, valuing her
not for who she was as a unique person, but for her membership in the “community of
mothers” and association with the nation. As an individual, the mother is often invisible and
takes a secondary role in Victorian literary texts as well as daily life. Susan Sowerby and the
Queen of Hearts, for example, are primarily absent as individuals (though they are present as
abstractions) for most of The Secret Garden and Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, respectively.
Furthermore, Mary Lennox becomes secondary to Colin once the boy enters the novel—that is,
once Mary’s transformation into a mother figure is complete. The invisible mother is also
apparent in the life of Queen Victoria, who, despite the ubiquity of her image, had to “suppress
the particulars of an individual life”\(^{26}\) in order to be a role model for her people and a powerful
queen. Thus, these representations of the female in Victorian children’s literature support the
paradoxical nature of Queen Victoria and the ideal Victorian woman, whose mother identity
simultaneously supplied and sapped her queenly power.

\(^{26}\) Alison Booth, “Illustrious company: Victoria among other women in Anglo-American role model anthologies,” in Remaking Queen Victoria, eds. Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 70.