

The Subversive Mary Poppins: An Alternative Image of the Witch in Children's Literature

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Abstract: Pamela Lyndon Travers was born in Australia, pursued her writing career in England, and became world famous in children's literature for her books about Mary Poppins. Mary Poppins was adapted for film in 1964, and later for the stage. In the character of Mary Poppins, Travers subverted the stereotype of the witch as evil. Unlike conventional portrayals of witches that were based on the Christian church's demonization of powerful women in the Middle Ages, Mary Poppins is not a cannibalistic hag, but both nanny and teacher to her charges. That she is a caretaker of children does not lessen her magical power.

This article explores the witch's place in history and in fairy tales, and how Travers subverted the negative stereotype through Mary's dual role as nanny and witch, taking into account Maureen Anderson's ideas on the metaphor of the witch, Cristina Pérez Valverde's discourse on the marginalization of women, and Sheldon Cashdan's theory on the function of the witch in fairy tales. Mary's magical powers give the Banks' children a new perspective and philosophy of life; drawing on mythic figures from a pre-Christian era, Travers's storytelling magic does the same for young readers.

Keywords: witch, nanny, magic power

1. INTRODUCTION

P. L. Travers (1899-1996) was an actress, a journalist, a drama critic, an essayist, and a lecturer, but she is best known as the creator of Mary Poppins. Travers wrote eight Mary Poppins books, beginning with *Mary Poppins* in 1934, and ending with *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* in 1988.¹

What Stacy Russo calls "Travers' lifelong spiritual journey" (2006, p. 60) is in evidence in her travel essays as well as her other writings;² it also shines through in her treatment of Mary Poppins, who began life as a brief comic turn for a newspaper column. When Travers's friend and mentor the poet and theosophist George Russell suggested she write about a witch, Travers was inspired to turn her comic nanny into "a shapeshifter."³ The children's book that resulted was popular with children, including the young Sylvia Plath, and even of interest to adults like T. S. Eliot.

Walt Disney discovered Mary Poppins through his daughter's delight in the books; it would take him fifteen years to convince Travers to let him adapt her character to film. When the Disney version of *Mary Poppins* came out in 1964, making its author rich, Travers was so upset by what Caitlin Flanagan calls "the strange kind of violence" the film had wreaked on her creation that she

¹ The other books are: *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943), *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952), *Mary Poppins From A to Z* (1962), *Mary Poppins in the Kitchen* (1975), and *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane* (1982).

² Travers contributed to the magazine *Parabola: Myth and the Quest for Meaning*, which featured such luminaries as Joseph Campbell, Ursula Le Guin, Pablo Neruda, and Italo Calvino, among others.

³ See <http://www.myspace.com/p_l_travers/blog/452077145#!>.

wept at the opening, even as the rest of the audience gave the film a standing ovation. The magical nanny had achieved worldwide fame, but at the cost of being, in a sense, de-witched. In the Disney version Mary Poppins is more like a fairy godmother than a witch, and her task is to restore the absentee Banks parents to their children, to create a conventionally happy family, one in which children are not raised by servants. The literary Mary Poppins was a different creature and her task more mysterious. Travers's Mary Poppins is not sweetly helpful or simply good; she was supposed to be a witch, with all the power that the term implies.

How exactly did Travers make Mary Poppins into a witch? Travers studied world mythology and mysticism,⁴ and brought a wealth of knowledge to the undertaking. She did not think of her witch in terms of the stereotype that has come down to us from the Middle Ages, the wicked witch in a pointy hat who eats children. Travers saw Mary Poppins as an even more ancient type of witch – a pre-Christian version of a powerful, magical woman, a priestess to older gods and goddesses, a medicine woman communing with the spirits of animals and plants, tuned into the magic of the natural world.

Before we look at how Travers subverted the stereotype of the witch and the Christian prejudice against a strong, solitary, powerful female that accompanied it, we need to understand the stereotype itself, both its historical roots and its role in fairy tales.

2. THE WITCH AS GODDESS AND SCAPEGOAT

In the pre-Christian era of polytheism, when goddesses were worshipped along with gods, stories about powerful, magical women abounded. Some of these women may have been revered initially as goddesses, priestesses, or healers, and later fallen under the more maleficent term “witch”. For example, the enchantress or witch Circe, who turned men into pigs in *The Odyssey*, also had wild wolves and lions on her island, “fawning, swishing their long tails”. Their presence and behavior links Circe the witch to an even older figure, the Mistress of Animals. Robert Tindall and Susana Bustos suggest that Circe was a folkloric remnant of this goddess, who appears in indigenous cultures worldwide as a reminder of the reciprocal connection between humans and animals (Tindall & Bustos, 2012, p.77, p.80).

Other pre-Christian goddesses who may have been recast as “witches” were the three who controlled birth, death, and fate through spinning the threads of an individual's life and cutting them at death. In Scandinavia these three goddesses were called the Norns, in Greece the Moerae or the Fates, while ancient Saxons had a triple goddess called Wyrð. This goddess later became the Weird Sisters, portrayed by Shakespeare as the three witches stirring a witches' brew in a bubbling cauldron in *Macbeth*.

The Celtic Ceridwen was also known for the magic brew in a cauldron she tended for a year and a day; the first three drops of the mixture conferred wisdom, the rest was a fatal poison. Scholars argue about whether, as Robert Graves suggests, Ceridwen was a dark aspect of the Threefold Goddess or simply a witch in a poem by the bard Taliesin in the late Middle Ages.

In some cases, any powerful woman could be called a witch. In ancient Rome the term was applied to women who were financially independent and did not need to rely on men. In the Middle Ages, when the Christian church posited a male, monotheistic god, the situation of women worsened, and to be called a witch was to be in danger of losing one's life. Maureen Anderson states that any woman in the public eye was “at risk of being called ‘witch’” (2007, p.100), and any woman who did not seem virginal and/or maternal was presumed to be “in league with the devil.” As well, “any deviation from the accepted and enforced norm for femininity was suspected as witchcraft” (Anderson, 2007, p. 87).

Bent on ousting the earlier, more earth-based religions that worshipped goddesses as well as gods, the Christian church began to portray women as the source of evil instead of the source of life. Through smearing the image of women and with witch-hunts in Europe and America, “a patriarchy tried to control, to harness and almost succeeded to kill and silence one half of the

⁴ Travers also studied the Gurjieff System, formulated by the influential Russian mystic George Gurjieff, for awakening higher consciousness.

human population" (Anderson, 2007, p. 90). While there are stories of male witches, and men were certainly killed during the witch-hunts of the Middle Ages, most often the witch was identified as female, and as wicked. According to Anderson:

The conception of the witch, compounded by the ever-restrictive roles of women, after the rise of Christianity, was directly connected to the idea of a Christian devil...[and] laced with the fear and suspicion of the feminine. Likewise, the power associated with witches and the feminine was consistently denounced by church officials and the political sphere. (2007, p. 72)

Herbalists, midwives, and indigenous healers who communed with nature spirits also were sometimes called witches, but the term "witch" came to denote someone wholly evil. Thus, according to Barbara Walker, even "healing became a crime punishable by death if it was practiced by a woman" (1983, p. 1089). She recounts the story of Alison Peirsoun of Byrehill, a woman who was "so famous as a healing witch that the archbishop of St. Andrews sent for her when he was sick, and she cured him. Later he not only refused to pay her fee, but had her arrested, charged with witchcraft, and burned" (Walker, 1983, p. 1089).

The historical treatment of someone suspected of witchcraft also can be linked to the treatment of the witch in classic fairy tales. The *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hammer of Witches*, a handbook that was used in the Middle Ages, tells how to identify witches since, "for the sake of humanity, the church and the good of civilization, [they must] be caught, tortured and killed" (Anderson, 2007, p. 87). Many of the fairy tales from the Grimm brothers' collection were conceived when witch-hunting was rife, and incorporated the details of actual witch hunts and punishments into their plots.⁵ As we shall see, the portrayal of the witch in classic fairy tales reflects the attitude of those who carried out the witch hunts.

3. THE IMAGE AND ROLD OF THE WITCH IN FAIRY TALES

In fairy tales the witch must be demonic, greedy, and cannibalistic, powerful and mysterious, and female. Anderson suggests that "[a]s a symbol, the 'witch' is not merely a metaphor, but also a model of understanding for the strong feminine in culture" (2007, p. 135). In some fairy tales, such as *Cinderella*, a wicked stepmother takes on the role of witch; she is a cruel and demonic woman, although without any magical powers beyond the strength of her hatred of the protagonist. The witch is female because it is in part her femaleness which makes her frightening: "she is that which society depends on and yet cannot control" (Anderson, 2007, p. 29).

While there are stories about male witches or sorcerers, such as the Disney film *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*,⁶ "regardless of the probability of the masculine witch in society, consistent to human culture is that a witch is first and foremost considered feminine" (Anderson, 2007, pp. 5-6). This tendency toward a feminine narrative is played out in fairy tales featuring witches and/or wicked stepmothers, where the father figure is often "weak or unavailable" (Cashdan, 1999, p. 94). Sheldon Cashdan suggests that this is because fairy tales "are maternal documents" and thus "place greater emphasis on the relationship between mother and child, particularly as it relates to the development of the self" (1999, p. 94). Cashdan posits that the encounter with a dark, evil female brings children face to face with their own darkness.

Writing about the educative value of the fairy tale in *The Witch Must Die*, Cashdan suggests that a fairy tale can "help children deal with the internal conflicts they face in the course of growing up" (1999, p.6). This occurs because, as children read or hear fairy tales, they identify with the protagonist even as they search for themselves in the unfolding adventure. Cashdan suggests that:

As the protagonist travels deeper and deeper into forbidden territory, so the reader is transported into unexplored regions of the self. And just as the reader is forced to face

⁵ See Cashdan 144.

⁶ First produced as animation, the plot was reprised in a feature film by Walt Disney Pictures in 2010. Walt Disney Pictures. *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. n.d. 14 10 2012. <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0963966/>>.

conflicts and dangers in the narrative—cannibalism, torture, or exile—so the reader is forced to confront struggles and threats in the psyche. (1999, p. 31)

To explain how children might come to terms with ordinary life through a fantastical story, he presents the example of Hansel and Gretel as a cautionary tale against gluttony.

Even after Hansel and his sister descend on the witch's house and eat their fill, they continue to devour greedily what's left of the cottage: "Hansel, who liked the taste of the roof, tore down a great piece of it, and Gretel pushed out the whole of a sugar window pane." One of the great challenges of childhood is knowing when enough is enough. (Cashdan, 1999, p. 13)

The wicked witch puts Hansel and Gretel in touch with their own greed and the need to control it; she herself is the danger that giving into it can unleash.

In *Snow White* the fault or danger to be faced is vanity. As Cashdan states: "Like the queen, Snow White wants to be pretty, to be elegant, to be admired. The young child also is driven by vain impulses" (1999, p. 53). Thus the malign, although in this case supernaturally beautiful witch is like a mirror in which children may observe their desires as well as their fears, and "[i]n one fairy tale after another, the witch embodies unwholesome aspects of the self that all children struggle against" (Cashdan, 1999, p. 17). As a result, the witch functions in the story as a teacher, albeit a dangerous and frightening one.

Cashdan's point is that eventually the storyteller has to kill off the witch because "only by destroying the witch can one ensure that bad parts of the self are eradicated and that good parts of the self prevail" (1999, p. 35). When the witch is dead, "the child no longer is plagued by self-recriminations and self-doubts." (Cashdan, 1999, p. 37). The death of the witch is equated with "the banishment of all that is undesirable in the self", with the triumph of good over evil, and "the story progresses to its inevitable happy ending" (Cashdan, 1999, p. 162). According to Cashdan, then, the child's journey of self-discovery in a fairy tale has four parts: the *crossing*, where the protagonist moves into a magical, alien land; the *encounter* with a malevolent figure such as an ogre or a witch; the *conquest*, in which the protagonist triumphs in a life-or-death struggle; and the *celebration*, in which a feast or reunion celebrates the downfall of the witch, and everyone lives happily ever after (Cashdan, 1999, p. 31).

While the death of the witch may signal a happy ending in fairy tales even as it fulfills the stereotype of witches as wicked and in need of killing for good to prevail, not all witches in fairy tales are evil, and not all of them die. The Russian fairy tale *Vasilisa the Beautiful* tells the story of the young girl Vasilisa's encounter with the witch Baba Yaga, who is a recurring figure in Baltic folklore, and "more than just an evil witch who feeds on defenseless victims. She is a great earth mother who holds dominion over the universe. She controls the bounty of the fields and is also the master of night and day" (Cashdan, 1999, p. 120).

Though Baba Yaga is not kind, and she will eat Vasilisa if the girl makes a wrong move, the witch helps the girl defeat her stepmother, who is completely malevolent. Although harsh, Baba Yaga is also wise. She "doles out advice from her store of wisdom, counseling Vasilisa that not all questions have answers, and that it is not well for children to know too much" (Cashdan, 1999, p. 120).

Baba Yaga flies through the air in a cauldron shaped like a mortar that she steers with an oar shaped like a pestle; she is old and frighteningly ugly, like the stereotypical wicked witch; and she gives Vasilisa a skull with burning eyes to light her way home, a horrific "gift". But this is the gift that will save her, and according to Jungian storyteller Clarissa Pinkola Estes, the Vasilisa story has "archetypal roots dating back at least to the old horse-Goddess cults which predate classical Greek culture" (Estés, 1992, p. 75). In other words, in Baba Yaga the power of an earth goddess is hidden behind the image of a witch.

Mary Poppins, as we shall see, also draws her power from an older magic, and hides it. But Mary Poppins is hiding behind the image of a nanny.

4. THE NANNY IS A WITCH

Although she is not frightening to look upon, Mary Poppins can seem as stern as Baba Yaga, and

as vain and authoritative as a goddess. Mary Poppins has another characteristic in common with witches and goddesses. She seems to have the forces of nature at her command.

For instance, Mary Poppins is able to travel on the wind. She first appears to the Banks children as “a shape hurled against the front door in the midst of a gale, [then] assumes the form of a woman, bullies Mrs. Banks into hiring her, snaps at the children, and doses them with a mysterious potion after she gets them alone in the nursery.”⁷ But Mary's potion, which is supposed to be medicine, changes for each person who tastes it into whatever they love best: to Michael the medicine tastes like strawberry ice; to Jane, lime-juice cordial; and to Mary herself, rum punch. Mary also has a magic carpetbag that appears empty but carries everything she needs, including a cot to sleep on, her nightgowns, her cake of Sunlight soap. Coming up the stairs for the first time behind the children's chattering mother, Mary levitates, riding the banister *up*.

Despite such delightful magic, Travers's Mary is not an easy person; she is most often stern, scornful, and abrupt. When she first meets the children, she “regarded them steadily, looking from one to the other as though she were making up her mind whether she liked them or not” (1997, p. 9). Then Mary Poppins takes the job, as Mrs. Banks later tells her husband “as though she were doing us a signal favor” (Travers, 1997, p. 10). As Jenny Koralek says: “There is absolutely nothing jolly, funny or cozy about Mary Poppins. Not given to unnecessary chatter or kissing and cuddling, she does have occasional moments of tenderness; but above all, she is *always there*, strong, calm, reliable” (Valverde, 2009, p. 265).

Mary's “there-ness” is at the core of her appeal to the Banks children. Mary Poppins is calm no matter what happens; she smells reassuringly of soap and starched apron and fresh toast; she is, in Travers' words, “plain, vain, and incorruptible”;⁸ and in her company the children know themselves to be safe. When Michael steals Mary's compass and is threatened by four gigantic animals, he shouts for her in terror and finds her right beside him; in that instant, all is well. Her matter-of-fact response brings its own comfort: “All right, all right. I'm not deaf, I'm thankful to say—no need to shout” (Travers, 1997, p. 101).

Mary Poppins, then, does not fit the fairy tale stereotype of an evil and malevolent witch. But she does provide a similar function in the story as a teacher and guide; her very presence seems to ensure the magical circumstances in which the children can confront their own worst qualities, their inner witch or ogre. For instance, in the chapter “Bad Tuesday” of *Mary Poppins*, Michael wakes up to find himself in the grip of an unreasoning anger, and he *must* be bad. He “kicked Mrs. Brill very hard on the shin, so that she dropped the rolling-pin and screamed aloud.” To make matters worse, he declared that he was “not sorry. I'm glad” (Travers, 1997, p. 83), and truly felt this to be so. At this point, he is completely under the spell of his own inner malevolence. That day Mary Poppins finds a magic compass and takes them on a journey to the four corners of the earth in the space of an afternoon, where they meet and converse with four different animals, somewhat like a shaman's journey to her power animals. In a sorcerer's apprentice twist, Michael steals Mary's compass and uses it himself, awakening power he is not able to command: the four animals are “[n]o longer kind and friendly”, but angry, just as Michael has been angry all day. Finally, face to face with their anger, Michael wishes he had been good.

According to Cashdan's aforementioned theory of the four-part journey to the self, at this point Michael has experienced the *crossing* into the magic compass world, the *encounter* with fierce animals, and the *conquest* as he regrets his anger, his cruelty, and his bad behavior. This is the signal for the *celebration*, which in this case is simply his return to his own room in the ordinary world, with Mary Poppins beside him. Now “he thought, too, how warm he was and how happy he felt and how lucky he was to be alive” (Travers, 1997, p. 103). With this return, he is also returned to himself, having faced his own darkness and finally overcome “the burning thing inside him [that] would not let him care” (Travers, 1997, p. 99). He experiences catharsis, and is amazed that “I've been so very naughty and I feel so very good” (Travers, 1997, p. 103). Readers who

⁷ See <http://www.myspace.com/p_l_travers/blog/452077145#!>

⁸ *ibid.*

have followed and identified with Michael's disasters may also feel the purifying emotional release of catharsis here.

As a nanny Mary Poppins has another the useful, goddess-like quality, which is her inherent authority; at one point Michael "discovered that you could not look at Mary Poppins and disobey her" (Travers, 1997, p. 12). What Mary says cannot be questioned or disobeyed, because what she says is always right, according to her. Despite the rest of the household's annoyance with such an irritating and conceited attitude, it turns out to be the simple truth: Mary knows what's what. By the beginning of the second book, when Mary Poppins returns, even the Bank's servants are willing to admit it.

But why is Mary Poppins willing to be a nanny? She is vain, arrogant, and unsentimental about children, and more inclined to scold than to hug them for their wild joy on her returns. Besides, with the power at her disposal she must have better things to do. Indeed, in the first chapter of *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, when Jane begs her not to leave them again, Mary Poppins glares at her. "A nice life I'd have," she remarked, "if I spent all my days with you" (Travers, 1997, p. 24). This raises another question: where is Mary Poppins when she is away from them, and what is she doing when she is not pretending to be a nanny? On her night out, we later learn, she is the honored guest of all the stars in the sky, and is kissed on the cheek by the sun himself, so we must imagine marvels.

But the answer to the first question, although unstated, seems to be twofold: first, that Mary truly cares for the children (she wears a locket with a picture of the children and herself in it, which keeps her with them until the chain of the necklace breaks); and second, that she stays with them at Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane because she has something profoundly important to teach them.

As she performs the duties of a nanny, Mary Poppins acts as a "mediator between the children and the magic realms" (Valverde, 2009, p. 273). In the magic world the children learn to see from a different perspective; their experiences with Mary Poppins change them. As Valverde says:

Her magic endeavours tend to occur at night-time, when the logic of the household is suspended, a circumstance that enables the children to discover other levels of reality, together with a system of values different from the one prevalent in their own *milieu* (for instance, they learn to respect all creatures). Despite her seemingly officious and irritable manner, then, she helps the children appreciate the importance of dreams and the imagination. (Valverde, 2009, p. 267)

With Mary the children meet Maia, a little girl who is also an ancient star, one of the Pleiades out Christmas shopping for her sisters. On a visit to Mary's uncle, Jane and Michael find themselves laughing so hard that they levitate like balloons. At Mary's Full Moon birthday party at the zoo, where people are in cages but the animals are free, Jane and Michael discover that the seals don't enjoy performing and that the bear had to struggle for ten days to remove the lid on the tin of golden syrup Michael gave him; and the children think about their younger siblings the baby twins, how terrible it would be if they were here in cages, as the animals usually are.

As well as the magic that produces marvels, Mary Poppins has a fund of the daily magic associated with ordinary life, and with the taken-for-granted, rushed-by, unnoticed magic of nature. She sees the world as viewed by small children, who have not become inured to its wonders yet. As a book reviewer remarks, Travers's Mary shows us "the possibilities of excitement in everyday events and everyday things".⁹

Mary can understand not only the conversations of the wild animals in the zoo, but of dogs and starlings, sparrows and sunlight. Her daily magic is part and parcel of how she takes care of her charges, how she performs the duties of a nanny, but also how she educates the children: that she can understand the snobbish neighbor's pampered but free-spirited dog Andrew is an education in looking beyond appearances. Her converse with starlings and sunlight and preverbal babies may reveal an ability to commune with nature that is based on paying attention, and *not* taking its

⁹ See <<http://www.helium.com/items/819119-book-reviews-mary-poppins-by-p-l-travers>>.

miracles for granted, and this may explain her excellence as a caretaker of small children, too. She takes time and pays attention to the "small" things, like birds and stars, like sunlight and babies.

The chapter about the twins John and Barbara in *Mary Poppins* is a good example. The twins at this point are still in the baby-babbling stage of language development, but they can talk to the sunlight, and the starling who visits them. As a witch Mary Poppins can understand the twins, the starling, and the sunlight, too, but the twins wonder why Jane and Michael cannot. Mary tells them: "Because they've grown older." The twins think Jane and Michael are "silly" for forgetting this earliest language. John says: "I know *I* shan't forget when *I* get older." "Nor I," said Barbara. But the starling tells them they will. "It isn't your fault, of course... You'll forget because you can't help it" (Travers, 1997, pp. 141-142). The only human who can remember, he says, is Mary Poppins, and she's The Great Exception.

In this chapter, readers learn that there is a price to pay for growing up, the loss of a particular kind of magic. As babies, we can talk to the sunlight! As adults we speak a different language. No one can retain that first language after learning the second language of human society, except for Mary Poppins.

5. THE FUNCTION OF SECRECY: PROTECTION, EDUCATION AND INITIATION

Another feature of her magic is that Mary Poppins never explains any of it, or answers the children's questions about it. As Jane says, Mary Poppins "knows everything, but she never tells" (Travers, 1997, p. 153). Considering the age-old prejudice against witches, Mary Poppins' refusal to talk about their magical adventures could be a method of protecting herself; and it also could be a way of protecting Jane and Michael. Instead of burdening the children with the need for secrecy about their magical outings (which would also divide them from their parents), Mary denies that anything out of the ordinary has happened; she even acts affronted, so that they will not bring it up again.

But she continues to take the children on magical adventures. Furthermore, they are able to spy on her clandestine magic-making (pasting stars in the sky or budding branches on the trees) with impunity. The reader suspects that Mary is aware of their spying, and even sanctions it. In *Mary Poppins*, Jane and Michael are guests of honor at her birthday party, not because she brings them, or even pays any attention to them once they arrive, but because "a voice" wakes them in the middle of the night and leads them to the zoo, and all the animals treat them as honored guests (instead of consigning them to cages with the rest of the humans).

Valverde writes that "this nanny is exclusive and mysterious, and addresses the children in a like manner, valuing suggestion and personal discovery rather than simply informing them about how things are" (2009, p. 266). By refusing to answer their questions, Mary Poppins gives the children the freedom to come to their own conclusions about what happens around them. She teaches them to think for themselves.

Despite Mary's angry denials whenever the children ask about her magic, Jane and Michael have plenty of confirmation for what they have experienced. They have each other to verify what they have seen, and they always have material proof of what occurred, like the snakeskin belt Mary is wearing after their night at the zoo, or the kite tassels hooked to her jacket after she returns to them on Michael's kite, or the fact that her fur-topped gloves are gone after she gives them to Maia, the little star sister of the Pleiades. In this last instance, even dithery Mrs. Banks notices the missing gloves, and Mary reacts as she does with the children, explaining nothing and pretending to be insulted.

Mary's secrecy also may have to do with the nature of what she is teaching them. Perhaps, like Baba Yaga, Mary feels it is not good for children to "know too much". Or perhaps, as Aristotle said about initiates of sacred mysteries two thousand years ago, "The initiate does not learn something but is made to experience the Mysteries and change his or her state of mind" (Foley, 1993, p. 69).

In an era that values rational scientific thought on the one hand and Christianity on the other, what is Mary Poppins teaching? She levitates, and in her presence the children do, too; she takes them

on magical journeys around the world; she talks and dances with animals; she helps Mrs. Corry paste stars onto the sky. The levitation, magical journeys, and converse with animals sound like a shaman's journeys to power animals in other realms; dancing with wild animals recalls the aforementioned mythic figure the Mistress of Beasts; the strange old lady pasting stars to the sky is named Mrs. Corry, which is the same pronunciation as Core, an ancient creator goddess;¹⁰ even Maia of the Pleiades was considered one of the Seven Mothers of the World in ancient India.¹¹ And the snake at the zoo – Christianity's symbol of evil but an ancient symbol of wisdom from Egypt to India¹² – tells Jane and Michael that “Child and serpent, star and stone—[are] all one” (Travers, 1997, p. 175). In Travers' hands, Mary's magic and her particular brand of witchery are echoes from another age.

6. MARY POPPINS AS A TEACHER: THE SUBVERSIVE OUTSIDER

As we have seen, in the middle Ages a woman named as a witch could be tortured and killed. In a less murderous age such a woman is more likely to be exiled from ordinary society, since she “is an embodiment of a social crossroads...the feminine archetype of that kind of transformation the patriarchal society must control and resist” (Anderson, 2007, p. 107). Put simply, as a woman with supernatural power a witch is perceived as a threat, and therefore is unacceptable in society.

Other stories point out society's tendency to exile any powerful female, not only those who are suspected of supernatural gifts. In the contemporary fairy tale “The Princess Who Stood on Her Own Two Feet”, the prince cannot bear the fact that his wife “is taller than he, for it suggests that she may eclipse him” (Cashdan, 1999, p. 243). Her height implies that she may be larger than he is in other ways, and he does not rejoice in her strength. Women who are successful or powerful may challenge the social order, so they are perceived as abnormal, if not downright dangerous. And so it would be with the solitary and peremptory Mary Poppins, except that she dons the inoffensive mask of a nanny.

In Valverde's view, “The wizard woman questions the very order from which she is excluded by means of extraordinary skills, capable of defying normal human rules. While remaining outside traditional ties of kinship, her power manifests itself as an unmanageable force that escapes patriarchal control” (Valverde, 2009, p. 264). We can see this in the relationship of Mary Poppins to the Banks family.

The Banks family may be taken as representing an ideal patriarchal family – that is to say, the conventional middle-class ideal of the early twentieth century – where the man goes to work and provides the money, and the dithery, meek woman goes shopping and “runs” the household with plenty of help from servants. Meanwhile the children stay with their nanny in the nursery, which is “a place of subjection for the children, conforming to their parents' strict rules” (Valverde, 2009, p. 266). But Mary's “secrecy and private codes challenge the rules prevalent in the Banks' household” (Valverde, 2009, p. 266).

It is interesting that Mrs. Banks, the patriarchal society's ideal woman (e.g., meek and unthreatening), is the parent who interviews Mary Poppins on the doorstep and then allows the witch into her house. Not only that, “she (Mrs. Banks) led the way . . . talking all the time, without stopping once” (Travers, 1997, p. 8). As a nanny, Mary Poppins is accepted into the nursery. As a witch, who by her very nature is outside of patriarchal society, she is free of the boundaries of both nursery and patriarchy, and that freedom is one of the things she has to teach.

The tension between Mary and patriarchal society is brought out clearly in the Disney film, as Mr. Banks marches into the house and sings:

It's grand to be an Englishman in 1910
King Edward's on the throne;

¹⁰ According to Walker the name of Kore or Core was “so widespread that it must have been one of the earliest designations of the World Shakti or female spirit of the universe” (514) in *Woman's Encyclopedia*.

¹¹ See Walker, Barbara G., *Woman's Encyclopedia*, p. 803.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 903-8.

It's the age of men
I'm the lord of my castle
The sov'reign, the liege!
I treat my subjects: servants, children, wife
With a firm but gentle hand
Noblesse oblige!

Mr. Banks seems to think that he owns not only the house but also the people in the house; at the least, they are his subjects and should obey him. Mary Poppins never does. She flouts convention and the English class system; when her friends the chimney sweepers have an impromptu dance party on the roof that migrates into the Banks house, leaving Mary and the Banks children happily covered in soot, and the servants and Mrs. Banks dancing and singing, Mr. Banks is outraged and demands to know what is going on. He gets the same answer Michael does from Mary Poppins: "I never explain anything." But this does not mean she is not teaching them all a great deal. As Valverde states, Mary's "'positive energy' transcends the walls of the nursery and influences the whole community" (2009, p. 269).

As a nanny and a teacher, Mary Poppins is still an outsider in the Banks family, even though she is closer to the children than their parents are. As well, she is by nature transient: she will only stay until the wind changes. Because of her endless journeying and her outsider status, Mary Poppins remains forever outside of "the bliss of family reconciliation" (Travers, 1997, p. 269).

But although it is impossible for Mary to be part of a family, she comes to the Banks house for a reason. She chooses to "take the position" (Travers, 1997, p. 10). In this way Mary Poppins is also the model of an independent woman: her own choices and values, not those of a husband, are what motivate her. As a spinster she is considered abnormal by the standards of patriarchal society; as a nanny, she is doing work that the same society perceives as unimportant although necessary. Since she has more than enough power to do as she pleases, the question arises, why does she choose to take a menial position? The answer seems to be: because *she* knows that the work of caring for and educating children is important; and because the children, and the community, need her.

Mary's presence, and her ability to take time and pay attention to the daily miracles that young children are aware of, are part of what make the magic happen all around her. Through Mary Poppins, Travers is concerned to make us aware of another birthright, one that patriarchal society has lost sight of: the interconnectedness of all things. As the Hamadryad or king cobra says: "We are all made of the same stuff . . . the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star—we are all one, all moving to the same end. Remember that when you no longer remember me" (Travers, 1997, p. 175).

7. CONCLUSION

Women who were accused of witchcraft were tortured and killed for hundreds of years for being "evil" and a threat to Christianity; the witches in fairy tales have suffered a similar fate. While fairy tale witches function as mirrors of the faults a young reader needs to overcome, as symbols of magical women they present the image of a monstrous and malevolent female. P. L. Travers subverts this conventional image of the witch and offers an alternative perspective in her character Mary Poppins, who is both a witch and a nanny, a woman of great supernatural power and a caretaker of children.

Mary Poppins does not eat children or murder them. She neither seduces nor betrays them. Instead, she opens their eyes to the magic of the natural world. She has at least as much power as the traditional wicked witch, but she uses it to share marvels with the Banks children. As the Banks children experience magical adventures that enlighten them about their own identity and the larger world, young readers are also enlightened.

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