

THE DOMESTIC SYBIL: FEMINIST CONCERNS
IN P. L. TRAVERS'S MARY POPPINS
AND MARY POPPINS COMES BACK

DONNA M. REVTAI

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by

Donna M. Revtai

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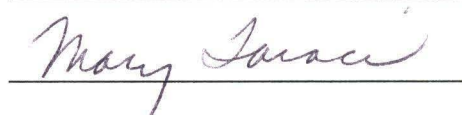
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Donna M. Revtai

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SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:



Thesis Advisor


Chairperson, Department of English


Dean, College of Arts and Humanities


Dean of Graduate Studies and Research


Date

ABSTRACT

Author: Donna M. Revtai

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Certain elements in P. L. Travers's *Mary Poppins* (1934) and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935) depict concerns that feminist critics deem important, such as mother figures, females as artists, women who exert power or lack it, female self-concepts, matrilineal connections and mother/child relationships. Travers sometimes treats these subjects ambiguously or ambivalently, but her attention to them indicates a riveting interest at the time. Her creative process whereby she projected childhood fantasies onto her ideal nanny, Mary Poppins, with whom she identified herself and others, relates to a feminine psychology. Travers's cyclic and web-like plots may link her to feminist aesthetics as currently being explored.

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Introduction

The publication of (P.)amela L.(yndon) Travers's *Mary Poppins* as a children's fantasy book in 1934 met with popular success and favorable reviews (*Book Review Digest* 948). The book has since been published worldwide in over twenty languages (Commire 208-210). Moreover, Travers's magical nanny, who became a visually recognizable figure through Mary Shepard's "lean and unsentimental pen and ink" (Higgins 131) drawings, reappeared in five successful sequels and four diversive "bibelots" spanning a readership over five decades (Demers 69).¹ Within the last thirty years the *Mary Poppins* series, and the whole of Travers's work, has attracted more scholarly attention than previously (and Travers's recent death in April of 1996 may generate a flurry of new criticism as well). Few critics, however, have approached the feminist concerns in the series as this study entails.

In *Mary Poppins and Myth*, which was read by Travers before its publication in 1978, Staffan Bergsten cautions that to infer a "streak of feminism" in Travers's work, based on her enthusiasm for the role models of women in her article "Grimm's Women," is to misinterpret it; he asserts instead that Travers sees in this traditional

literature a "reflection of an older social order where the woman/mother played a dominant role" (25). Bergsten questions what role Mary Poppins plays and determines that it seems to be a combination of types (25-26). He concludes that "no doubt Mary Poppins came to embody a whole series of projections of more or less unconscious, sometimes contradictory, tendencies and ideals in the author herself" (26). Attributing these discrepancies to the author's youth at the time of composition (twenty-nine), Bergsten avoids asserting any definitive parallels to Travers's life.

My study probes such inconsistencies and attempts to identify some biographical connections between Travers's life and elements in the Poppins fantasies. I aim to show how Travers projected her fantasy ideals, drawn from childhood experiences, onto the role model of the wise woman of power she exemplified in Mary Poppins. In addition, although a "self-conscious female authorial voice" identified by Josephine Donovan as necessary to feminist literature (44) is not found in the series, feminist concerns are present in many of the stories and characterizations. I examine feminist literary concerns such as Travers's depiction of women as Earth-mothers and earthly mothers, the portrayal of females as storytellers, artists,

authority figures or teachers of wisdom, females who exercise or who lack power, female self-concepts and matrilineal connections.

Admittedly, however, Travers sometimes treats these concerns ambivalently or ambiguously in the books. Illuminating these concerns, whether "subliminal" or overt messages (Honig 1-2), as feminist aspects in the fantasies, requires me to consider the fact that Travers once confirmed that she personally had not felt persecuted as a woman or writer:

I am happily a woman. Nothing in me resents it.
All of me accepts it and always has. Mind you, I
haven't suffered. I haven't been in a profession
where women are paid less than men. Nothing has
been hard for me as a woman. But I sympathize
with women who want to live themselves to the
full. (Burness 229)

I think that such a sympathy for the full range of women's experiences, gleaned partially from Travers's personal life, found a subtle expression in certain stories and characters in the Mary Poppins series. Yet the feminism revealed is not sounded by a self-conscious voice but one like that of a Sybil whose messages must be interpreted from the winds she rides and the leaves she writes upon.

As an interpreter, however, I find it hard to resist Travers's invitation, "If you are looking for biographical facts, *Mary Poppins* is the story of my life" (*Junior Book of Authors* 288). While my

interests in Travers's biographical influences on her creative writing process and her ideas on female identity may be characteristic of the American vein of feminist criticism, as Maggie Humm observes (111), I have also considered some concerns that have been of interest to English feminists such as "women's relationships to themselves in terms of class, historical context and those as representations in literary form" (111), (particularly in my first chapter), and the "key concepts of domesticity and marriage" (112). Eclectic as my approach may seem, it proceeds on Travers's encouragement that "A writer is only half a book--the other half is the reader" (Mickelson 644). Further prompted by Travers's claims that her fantasy is appropriate for adults as well as children (*On Not Writing for Children*), and that she does not write for children but for herself and those who are aware of having once been children (Butler 69), this study focuses on the female figures, human and non-human, in the first two books of the series, *Mary Poppins* (1934) and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), hereafter cited in this text as *I* and *II* respectively.

I also explore the special relationship portrayed between Mary Poppins and the eldest of her charges, Jane Banks. Some facets of their relationship bears a resemblance to the feminist literary model

of the queen mother and her trusting daughter in which the older woman imparts her wisdom and knowledge to a younger one (Heilbrun 237). And although Mary, being the Great Exception, cannot impart her privileged secrets of the universe or magical powers to her young human charge, she functions, nevertheless, as a wise woman of power by passing on a heightened awareness and an appreciation for a life fully infused with wonder, mystery and possibility.

Adopting a domestic fantasy mode rather than the heroic, Travers uses a realistic home setting as a base for the fantastic adventures the magical nanny, Mary Poppins, brings into the lives of the Banks children. These extraordinary adventures are episodic and clearly dependent on the titular character who, literally swept in with an open umbrella in hand by an east wind, appears unexpectedly at the door of the Banks family shortly after their former nanny has suddenly quit. Mary rescues the British middle-class Banks family from their domestic predicaments, and her magical presence soon opens a world of wondrous adventures to the Banks children and their surrounding community.

Travers helped to perpetuate the mysterious essence of Mary Poppins by de-emphasizing the importance of scholarly analysis of

her work and attributing a somewhat Zen-like mystical approach to her creative process. The author consistently claimed that she did not invent Mary Poppins but that the character "came as a sort of visitation" with "nothing that I in my conscious mind could possibly add to her" (*Current Biography* 46).² Critics and scholars, however, have consciously undertaken that task with more inclination.

Bergsten's examination of the first four books in *Mary Poppins and Myth* (1978) links Poppins to the superhuman heroes and heroines of mythology through her protection by higher powers, her ability to commune with animals, and her return to a "secret source" between her visits to mortals (17). Tracing the epic motifs of ascent, descent, and creation expressed in the fantasies and coupling her ability to fly and effect joyful weightlessness for those around her as well, he suggests Poppins "resembles a guardian angel" (34-36). Kenneth J. Reckford, an Aristophanes scholar, places her in the Dionysian tradition of fairy tales because Mary Poppins as "a wonderful transforming energy breaks through into ordinary life" bringing the characters and readers "out of ordinary custom and routine (which nonetheless remain extremely important) into a world of magic where the laws of nature are suspended and normal relations are changed too" (103). A more recent study (1991) by Patricia Demers

in the Twayne series for Children's Authors characterizes Poppins as a "cosmic nanny" (76) who nevertheless exhibits the human qualities of "loyalty and compassion" (77) thus making her a delightful "conundrum" (68). In a contrasting view, Sarah Gilead believes that Poppins has a debilitating effect on her charges by leaving them with a "sense of loss unmitigated by softened or playful tone" (95) and refusing "to define the use of enchantment" (100).

Travers's craft has elicited mixed reviews as well. In his introduction explaining why Travers's *Mary Poppins* had been excluded from the Children's Literature Association's third volume of *Touchstones: Reflections in the Best of Children's Literature: Picture Books*, critic Perry Nodelman opines that *Mary Poppins* not only lacks involving characters but also "the involving plot all touchstones novels possess . . . so much of its fantasy is, despite its inventiveness, finally unconvincing" (9).⁴ Bettina Hurlimann expresses a different opinion of its plot structure and praises the manner in which realistically described "large number of fantastic incidents . . . are brought together in a very remarkable way" (79). Thus, it appears that *Mary Poppins* is indeed somewhat of an enigma to readers and critics alike, and even Nodelman concedes that "the

character of Mary Poppins survives the flawed medium in which she exists" (10).

Finally, I examine the question whether the episodic nature of the plots is a literary weakness, as Nodelman claims, or suggests a feminist aesthetic. Bypassing the more academically recognized mode of heroic fantasy with its emphasis on the subcreation of self-contained secondary worlds, linear plot structures, and object quests, Travers opts for a flexible web-like structure rooted in a realistic domestic setting, allowing both writer and reader to move "adroitly between 'fantasy' and 'reality' . . . toying at the edge, this sense of the boundary . . . because it is precisely at the place where the two worlds meet that they have their significance for each other" (Hoffeld 4-5). The "heightened reality" (Demers 75) that results from such structure seems appropriate for Travers who openly declared: "I'm not interested in any other miracle but the ordinary. 'Extraordinary' is the quintessence of the ordinary" (Cott 237).

Chapter I

Empowering the Common Nanny

Travers's claim that she was not discriminated against as a woman in the writing profession is supported by the facts of her early success, but her comment of sympathy for those women who were less fortunate may be related to the post World War I "marriage bar" that existed in Britain for women entering certain professions (Magezis 80). Furthermore, despite the worldwide economic depression of the thirties which reduced employment opportunities for men and women alike, Travers had already "established a reputation as a poet, drama critic, and travel essayist in both the *Irish Statesman* and the *New English Weekly*" (Demers vii) by the time she published the first two Poppins books in 1934 and 1935. Travers also welcomed and valued the encouragement and constructive criticism offered to her by well established male authors, such as Irish writer George William Russell, the poet known as A.E., whom she acknowledged to be a close friend and an influential literary mentor, William Butler Yeats (Cott 221-22), and

others of their circle (Demers 8). Interestingly, Travers described the influence of these men upon her career with a very maternal metaphor saying they "licked me into shape like a set of mother cats with a kitten" (*Only Connect* 190).

When discussing Travers's occasional use of the pseudonym, Milo J. Reeves, in her theater reviews, Demers says that it would be too simple to

assume that this accomplished woman needed the weight of maleness to support or shore up her criticism. Travers confounds contemporary theorizing about the self-conscious female authorial voice, she seems instead to take a farceur's delight in sending up conventional notions of male authorship by deploying them so well. (44)

In the discussion of Travers's poetry, Demers observes that it rarely adheres to the "structural conditions" Donovan believes characterizes "a woman's poetics":

Among these shared experiences are "the condition of oppression," the confinement to "the domestic or private sphere," the creation of objects for use, rather than exchange, "certain physiological experiences" (most universally menstruation), "the childrearing role," and the "gender personality traits . . . [of] interdependency and emotional intensity." (18)⁴

In contrast to her poetry, however, Demers finds it curious that Travers's "most famous literary character is intricately linked

with childhood" (18). *Yet three of those conditions described by Donovan, oppression, domestic confinement and interdependency, are ones that Mary Poppins, as a nurturer of other people's children, is able to avoid, or escape from, precisely because she is magically empowered through the mode of fantasy.* For example, rather than needing the job for the money as any real nanny might, Poppins can afford to play the oppressor when she convinces Mrs. Banks during the interview that references are out of date, challenges her on the declared days off, and finally informs her that she will take the position if all conditions suit herself. Such a haughty posture is amusingly incongruous to those who were familiar, as Travers probably was, with the plethora of nannies available at the time of the story's frame (recall that Mr. Banks complains that nannies will be lining up outside the door, causing a traffic hazard for which he will have to hire a policeman). Others not so familiar with the situation can still appreciate the humor of a prospective employee making such demands. But as an empowered fantasy figure, Poppins can act subversively, against the status quo, without suffering significant consequences to herself as she is generally in control of most situations. In addition, these invested powers and the superior cosmic knowledge that Poppins possesses often allow her to subvert

the norms of society and the common expectations of her role as a nanny.

Readers eventually learn that Poppins does not confine herself to the mere domestic sphere of the nursery but socializes with mythological figures like Hamadryad and Apollo, while participating in special ritualistic celebrations like her birthday or midsummer's night. Several incidents in the stories indicate that Poppins may answer to a higher than human authority when she compassionately frees a caged lark from its demanding owner, whom she in turn shrinks and cages through magic, or steals the children's hoarded gilded paper stars from their eaten gingerbread to restore them to the night sky (*I*). Lastly, her sudden and unannounced departure from the Banks's children because the wind has changed underscores her apparent emotional independence. Thus, as Demers points out, Mary Poppins does not compare easily with other nannies in British literature or life (72-75).

Travers lifts Poppins above her human nanny counterparts in other ways. For while Poppins accepts the nanny position, which is technically that of a domestic servant, she is never oppressed by its working class limitations which Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy describes in *The Unnatural History of the British Nanny*, a study of British

nannies from the 1850's to 1939. He explains that historically the nanny emerged during a time when "there was a definite tradition of mothers allowing other people to look after their children" (69). By the end of the nineteenth century, a family could be considered "barely middle-class if you did not have a nursemaid for the children" (71). Gathorne also notes that, although positions for nannies seemed to decline from 1901 to 1939, the World War I period expanded the duties of a nanny to include other domestic tasks such as cooking for the children. Warring with the other domestic servants in the household was not uncommon for nannies who often viewed themselves as superior to the cook by virtue of the importance of their child-rearing responsibilities, while offended cooks, perceiving themselves as superior to the nanny, could retaliate with unappetizing meals for nanny (193). Class divisions were important in British society from the Victorian through the Edwardian period and "only slightly less so up to World War II" (71).

Ironically, though the fictitious Poppins is a magically endowed being, she seems to participate in some of the human conditions Gathorne outlines. Like real nannies, Poppins makes breakfast for her charges, but according to the children, she smells deliciously of freshly made toast in contrast to her more dispirited predecessor

who smelled of barley water. Although the cook, Mrs. Brill, never wars with Poppins openly, she exposes her working-class antagonism when she describes Mary's demeanor as "uppity" upon hearing of Poppins's unannounced departure from the household (*I*). Mary also enters into a power play with Mr. Banks's childhood governess, Miss Andrews, who unlike Poppins, represents society's approved structured education. In a contest of wills, Poppins reduces Andrews (also referred to as The Holy Terror) to doll size and consigns her to bird cage to teach her a much needed lesson about freedom for all members of society (*II*).

Because Mary can defy laws of nature like gravity and aging, mere manmade or societal restrictions appropriately do not apply to her. A kind of one-upmanship can also be seen in the verbal exchanges Poppins has with pompous public servants like the Park Keeper who lives by the rules (*II*) and the policeman who knows "wot's" the law (*I*). Poppins's sharper wit, cosmic knowledge and privileged status among mortals gives her the advantage in relegating such public authorities, usually males, to more humbled stances. Yet like the historical nannies of the time period of the books, she can be a stickler for the laws of human courtesy and

propriety, as when she chides the Butcher for complimenting her on her looks, or reminds the Park Keeper he is not wearing his hat.

Through clever blending of the real nanny's situation as a domestic employee and the privileged status of Mary Poppins as a magical one, Travers creates a heroine who, although seemingly common to the less enlightened, can literally rise above ordinary circumstances, at least, in a fictional world. Whether Travers was aware or sympathetic to the issues of the British left-wing feminists of the 1930's who were concerned about working mothers, women in the labor force, and motherhood (Magezis 80) is unknown, but her fantasy heroine is clearly one who transcends such problems of the real world. In addition, Poppins's resemblance to nannies of the primary world and the Banks's "London household securely locked in the 1930's" (Demers 9) contribute to the realistic domestic grounding in the books, but her magical presence and powers allow opportunities for characters and readers alike to enter fantastic and adventurous "quasi-primary secondary worlds" and "tertiary worlds" (Watson n.p.) to experience enriched lives.

Despite Travers's insistence that she did not deliberately create Poppins (*Junior Book of Authors* 287-88), but serendipitously discovered her through Mary's popping-ins upon her creative

impulse, a letter from an unnamed correspondent in Gathorne's book uncannily coincides with Travers's inspired treatment. The letter writer describes watching a line of more than a block of prospective employees for a position as their nanny during the Depression: "we peeped at the women with a real sense of humility: how could so many women want to look after us? We knew it was a dull, boring job" (182). The correspondent remembers her mother interviewing for hours these "desperate, lonely women, frequently asking capricious questions to vary the monotony. 'Do you play the violin? Can you turn somersaults?' " (182). Ironically, not only can Poppins do such turns, specifically perfect Catherine Wheels without so much as an improper flutter of her skirts, but she empowers others to do so too! (*I*, "Laughing Gas") Thus, Jane Mickelson notes that Travers has taken "that most prosaic of characters, the British nanny, and transfigured her into a woman of power, in the most literal sense of the word" (642). In doing so, Travers champions one of the most common female working figures in the British work force at the time, not in a political mode but in a world of fantasy which often suffices for what the real world does not afford.

Chapter II

Heroes and the Heroine: Transforming Childhood Role Models into a Literary Epitome

In her article, "The Heroes of Childhood: "A Note on Nannies," Travers relates how a succession of memorable nannies employed by her family, whose surname was Goff (*Sun Sentinel* 6B; *New York Times* C20), probably influenced her writing of *Mary Poppins* ("Heroes" 147). Her sensitivity to their situations, personality quirks, and mannerisms stimulated her childhood imagination and revealed itself in the Poppins fantasies. She tells of Katie Nanna, a massive woman who was "white and stern . . . always smelling of oatmeal" and never wilted in her rules or clothing, even in the rain (149). Poppins shares this crisp, firm quality, smells like fresh toast, and dresses impeccably. Travers's recollection includes a pair of aboriginal girls who served as aides to Katie Nanna, and who when not under their superior's eye, could be coaxed by the children into telling about the corroboree, the rituals of dance, and the meetings of the bush people. Katie Nanna had a talent for storytelling, a trait

exhibited by Poppins who sometimes assumes trance-like states when telling her tales.

Mary's penchant for snappy dressing with silver buttons, fur-lined gloves, and rose-adorned hats might have been inspired by the Nanny Alice who preferred to wear a scarlet dress with white daisies beneath her uniform until Mrs. Goff insist she desist or leave. The author remembers how Alice eventually agreed to remove the dress but declared: "I do it because I choose and not because I am made to" (151). Echoes of this proud, willful attitude are reflected in the chapter "Christmas Shopping" (*I*) after Poppins has given her fur-lined gloves to the scantily clad, shivering star-child, Maia, who comes from the sky to do her Christmas shopping in the same department store as Mary and the Banks children. Returning home, the children share the wondrous experience with their mother who is inclined to believe they have imagined it all until they tell her about Mary's gift of the gloves. Surprised by this sacrificial gesture, Mrs. Banks exclaims: "Your best fur-topped gloves! You gave them away!" and Mary haughtily replies: "My gloves are my gloves and I do what I like with them!" (193) Like Alice, Mary maintains her dignity and pride through declaring choice of action.

Following Alice's short stay was Amy whom Travers claims the

children never forgave because she reneged on the promise to award a three-penny bit to the child who retrieved her wind-blown hat. When all three of the Goff children returned with hands on the hat, Amy gave each a penny instead of a three-penny apiece. Travers says they all felt cheated by her action. In contrast, the Banks children trust Poppins's written promise of "Au revoir" at the end of the first book because, unlike Amy, "She always does what she says she will" (*I* 206).

After Amy came Nannie Reynolds who was a grandmother with a lovely "gurrl" grandchild ("Heroes" 153). But her services were terminated after three years when the family discovered she was stealing the children's clothing from the nursery shelves. Nanny Reynolds refused to give Mrs. Goff any explanations, and Travers's article does not reveal if the Banks children felt cheated as they had with Amy. In a like manner, the Banks children do not pass judgment upon Poppins's questionable action when she steals their paper stars from a shoe-box in a drawer to restore them to the sky. After seeing her replace them, the children are moved to wonder

"But how? But why?" said Michael . . .

Jane said nothing. . . . At last she shook back her hair and stretched herself and stood up.

"What I want to know," she said, "is this: Are the stars gold paper or is the gold paper stars?"

There was no reply to her question and she did not expect one. She knew that only someone wiser than Michael could give her the right answer. . . . (1 133)

This example does not imply that Nanny Reynolds had the wisdom or the "divine" rights of Mary Poppins to steal in order to restore nature, but it may suggest that for Travers some nannies possessed impregnable secrets as Poppins did for Jane and Michael.

The last of their nannies was Belle, whom Travers describes as old and scraggly; but to the Goff children's imagination she spoke of a mysterious world. Travers recalls Nanny Belle's talk about an aunt who "Lived on Her Capital" (153-54). In their naiveté, the children imagined this to mean that the aunt was living on herself, or rather eating her own body. This peculiar situation was to the Goff children a mystery of "terrific proportions" (154). Mrs. Corry, Mary Poppins's spindly old friend who operates the dingy gingerbread shop and nibbles on her own flavorful regenerative fingers, which she sometimes breaks off to offer as treats, may have inherited this fantastic ability from Travers's childhood memories about Nanny Belle's strange Aunt.

Clearly the many nanny figures in Travers's childhood influenced the characterization of Mary Poppins and possibly the other superhuman female characters in the books. The projection of

these human traits onto the powerful, magical female figures in the fantasies constitutes a feminist perspective that imaginatively transforms the human shortcomings of these individuals into special, even endearing, qualities to be wondered at and admired. Thus, as a child and later as a creative adult writer, Travers, through the power of her imagination, embellishes the lives of simple working class women and transmutes them into women of mystery, power and magic. In this light, it is not surprising that the literary figure of the magical Mary Poppins reflects a positive culmination of Travers's nannies who inspired her as childhood heroes. Elizabeth Honig, however, in her study of woman power in Victorian children's fantasy, raises a point that may be applicable to Travers's creation of Mary Poppins and her other magical female associates:

The supernatural element . . . paradoxically both adds and detracts from our view of the power of woman. These women may be viewed as supremely powerful only because they are magical women, whereas real women are submissive and powerless. (117)

Honig also believes that in Victorian fantasy the magical woman, as portrayed by Mary Louisa Molesworth and George MacDonald, “offered them a socially sanctioned way to present a truly powerful mother figure, a woman who lives a life of ‘significant action’ without being considered monstrous or witch-like”:

The choice of female figures, with their nurturing qualities, closeness to children in daily life, and their natural power over children, would be . . . a psychologically valid one for the child reader. But it must also reveal something about the writer's image of mothers/women or even perhaps reveal something about the writer's own psychological needs. (117)

A closer look at Travers's mother figures in the Poppins fantasies may very well lead to such insights.

Chapter III

Travers's Spectrum of Mother Figures

Images of mothers, a frequent topic of feminist criticism, find a variety of expression in *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back*. This is not as surprising as Travers once wrote in an autobiographical sketch, "The thing I like doing best is bringing up children and making gardens" (*Junior Book* 288). What is provocative is the spectrum these figures comprise: from powerful fantastic ones to powerless or comical human mothers with some negligent mothers of the animal kingdom sandwiched between. Serving as a foil, for the better or the worse illumination of these motherly figures, is the fantastically competent Mary Poppins. The source of Mary's power, however, is never divulged--only intimated.

Although Poppins assists friends like Mrs. Corry to replace the gilded stars as natural ones in the night sky (*I*), or helps her cousin Nellie Rubina Noah to usher in spring with painted wooden vegetation and animals which come to life after having been positioned outside during the night (*II*), it is still difficult to

categorize Poppins strictly as an Earth Mother or goddess. Travers was reluctant "to assert her as a kind of Ecstatic Mother," and viewed her as a "mere domestic . . . a handmaiden, but in whose service I do not know" (Cott 221). She agreed once conditionally, however, that Poppins "is either a Mother-Goddess or one of her creatures, that is if we're going to look for any mythological or fairy tale origins of Mary Poppins" (Burness 214). While Poppins's close associations with nature and her ability to talk with animals certainly confer her a special status in the cycle of natural life, one finds that she also exhibits behavior characteristics from other famous literary female figures as described by Norma Lorre Goodrich in *Heroines: Demi-Goddess, Prima Donna, Movie Star*. For example, she is like "the priestesses or 'witches' armed with magic," (xxvi) who sometimes "opposed their societies or disobeyed their rules and customs"; but lacks the savagery of a Medea, Jocasta, or Medusa (xxvi). Demers points out that some readers have traced Mary Poppins's lineage to ancient goddesses like Artemis and Sophia and the Hindu Terrible Mother Kali (9) while others like Gilead recognize her as a semi-divinity (99).

Bergsten, who relates Poppins to the heroines of mythology, adds that she "does not lack motherliness but combines it with a

harsher masculine aspect" (26), although he does not elaborate on what constitutes that masculine aspect. Some readers may think that it is Poppins's strictness with the children that qualifies as masculine, but as Gathorne's study indicates such demanding behavior was widely accepted as normal by British nannies. Perhaps the harsher masculine aspect Bergsten refers to is related to the emotional distance she displays when she departs in each book, or the confident, take-charge attitude she exudes in contrast to the helpless Mrs. Banks.

Two supernaturally endowed mother figures who exhibit harsher temperaments than Poppins are her wooden, doll-like cousin, Nellie Rubina, and the mysterious self-regenerating Mrs. Corry. Nellie Rubina is a Mother Nature type who generates the birth of spring through painted creations. As the "Eldest Daughter" and a "Direct Descendent," she flouts patriarchal authority more overtly than Poppins when she brusquely bosses and shouts orders to her apologetic and subservient Uncle-by-Marriage, Dodger, who serves as her bumbling assistant. The equally fantastic Mrs. Corry exhibits ambiguous maternal qualities that intrigue the Banks children and readers as well. For example, the Banks children quickly learn that despite her human appearance she is more than a

mere mortal because when she breaks off a sugary finger as a treat for the baby to nibble, another grows on the spot. Later, they discover that Mrs. Corry also engineers the pasting of the gilded stars onto the sky. Her two daughters, who assist in this task (and in the dingy, tenuous gingerbread shop), are her physical opposite--huge, slow-moving, and rather mournful, while she is thin and often dances quick steps. Always civil to Mary and the Banks children, but far less so with her own, she sends a mixed message of kindness for non-relatives and cruel criticism for her obedient daughters. Mrs. Corry may possess magical powers, but as a mother she enjoys inflicting emotional pain upon her daughters, an act Mary tacitly ignores and the Banks children view with more awe than even Mary's terrible, threatening stares. Despite the existence of Mrs. Corry's offspring, there is no mention of a Mr. Corry as co-creator. Apparently these supernatural mother figures operate independently of a traditional patriarchal system, and although all three function as agents for restoration in the natural world, the derivation of their powers is never directly revealed. In *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, however, "The Evening Out" chapter hints that Mary enjoys a privileged relationship with Apollo when "The Sun and Mary Poppins, together, yet apart, stood still," until he kisses

her lightly on the cheek (184-85). Whether this relationship is one of equality, or like that of a father and a favored daughter, or lover to lover, is not defined, but the scene effectively reconfirms her special status within Apollo's court.

At the powerless end of Travers's spectrum are inept human mothers. One of these is the comical Miss Lark, a smothering type, who unmarried and lacking a child of her own, treats her dog, Andrew, as one and calls him to come to "Mother." Her snooty class-consciousness (as evidenced by the two gates to her house; one for friends and relatives and the other for service people) extends to her raising of Andrew. She insists that Andrew must wear one of his four overcoats when outside, sleep on a silk pillow, go to the hairdresser twice a week, dine on oysters and daily cream, and not socialize with neighborhood dogs below his class. "The effect of all this was to make Andrew very much disliked in the neighbourhood" (*I* 51) and a laughable figure as well. Andrew's only solace for this humiliation is to spend time with his mixed-breed friend, whom he occasionally sees at the Park or at the gate. With Mary Poppins acting as an interpreter, Andrew is enabled finally to rebel against Miss Lark's smothering influence by making some demands of his own from his mistress. Rather than lose him completely, Miss Lark

agrees to all his demands: "And with that she turned and walked haughtily up the steps, sniffing away the last of her tears" (62). Miss Lark's maternal delusions and her snobbery in her relation to her pet make her a ripe comic character, but it is through Mary Poppins's intervention that Miss Lark learns that her mothering techniques with Andrew have been ridiculously inappropriate. Again Poppins makes right what nature intended as Andrew receives his freedom to be the dog he is.

Predominant among the inept human mothers in the first two books is the helpless Mrs. Banks, mother of five. Although seemingly well-meaning and loving toward her children, the broad strokes of her portrayal depict her as insecure, image obsessed, and incompetent because of ignorance and the lack of true wisdom. Travers once labeled Mrs. Banks as a "feather headed, silly little woman" and believed her portrayal as a politically motivated suffragette in the Disney movie adaptation credited the character with too much awareness (Cott 220). Yet as negative as her image may seem, subtle touches in Travers's depiction of Mrs. Banks indicate that she is not devoid of all sensitivity, but is often belittled in her roles as mother and wife by her own family. Several examples of her actions, or inaction as the case may be, illustrate the

mixed characterization. Whether Travers intended such an effect is difficult to determine, as it may relate to those inconsistencies to which Bergsten refers. Certainly for Travers, Mrs. Banks is a mother to be endured, not imitated, yet perhaps dutifully loved, as the British tradition of childrearing under the nanny system fostered. As an exaggerated character, she serves as a prime target for comedy.

Readers first meet Mrs. Banks in *Mary Poppins* as she frets over the sudden departure of Katie Nanna who left "Without by your leave or a word of warning. And what am I to do?" (2). Mr. Banks tells her to advertise for "the best possible nanny at the lowest wage and at once" (3), and then he absently-mindedly kisses her on the side of the nose and leaves for work in the big city. Before leaving, he notices that a cold East wind is blowing, so he chooses to wear two overcoats. The accompanying illustration by Mary Shepard (whom Travers often supervised) depicts a sad-looking Mrs. Banks dutifully holding the second overcoat for her imposing husband. Curiously this drawing lacks the levity it could display when one considers the physical awkwardness of putting on and wearing two long overcoats. Although some readers may find Mr. Banks's idea downright silly, Mrs. Banks complacently assists him before sitting down to write her letters "begging them to send some Nannies to her at once as she is

waiting" (5). Thus Mrs. Banks gives a first impression of being an indecisive, complaining, thoroughly dependent and non-assertive woman.

In the interview with Poppins, Mrs. Banks brings up the matter of references, but Poppins's confident reply, "Oh, I make it a rule never to give references," silences Mrs. Banks to a stare (8). When Mrs. Banks counters that it is the usual procedure, Mary Poppins assures her with a stern voice that providing references is "A very old-fashioned idea to my mind. Very old fashioned. Quite out of date, as you might say" (8). The narrator confirms that one thing Mrs. Banks did not like to be thought of was old-fashioned, so we see her succumb to Mary's requirements for the job rather than to trust her own judgment and experience. Mary proceeds to use the same psychology on Mrs. Banks concerning the practices of the best people when negotiating her days off in the second chapter, "The Day Out." Fearing Mary will quit if not satisfied, Mrs. Banks defers to her again.

The ending of this chapter presents a strong contrast in the male-female relationships of Mr. and Mrs. Banks and that of Mary Poppins with her friend, Bert, the sidewalk chalk artist and match seller with whom she spends her Day Out. When Bert apologizes to Mary for not earning enough that day to take her to tea, Mary

ameliorates the situation by enabling them to step into one of Bert's drawings for a bountiful version of high tea on a park green. Their simple clothes have been transformed into fancy ones, and the waiter treats them with utmost courtesy. When Mary returns home the Banks children ask her where she has been. "In Fairyland," she replies. Jane asks if she saw Cinderella while there. "'Huh, Cinderella? Not me,' said Mary Poppins, contemptuously. 'Cinderella, indeed!'" (28). She also dismisses Michael's question about the self-sufficient hero, Robinson Crusoe, causing the children to protest: "Then how could you have been there? It couldn't have been our Fairyland!" (28). She reacts with "a superior sniff. 'Don't you know,' she said pityingly, 'that everybody's got a fairyland of their own?'" (28). Unlike Mrs. Banks, the independent Mary relies on no males for her problem solving. Furthermore, her fairyland is personally tailored and does not include passive heroines waiting for their princes. Instead Mary's magical endowments enable her to provide her own resources. In comparison, Mrs. Banks is portrayed as quite incapable of such self-reliance, as she is not only financially dependent on her husband but also must always seek his advice before making any decision of significance.

In Chapter VI, "Bad Tuesday," Mrs. Banks reappears as the deficient mother totally unaware of the true nature of the rude behavior of her son, Michael, who awakening one day with a surly attitude, vents it on all those around him. Mrs. Banks's assessment of his behavior is that the child must be ill and simply in need of a fig syrup physic. But Michael sets her straight: " 'I'm not ill. I'm weller than you,' said Michael rudely" (*I* 85). Although his mother stands him in a corner for his naughtiness which does not abate, it remains for Mary Poppins to arrange a suitable punishment which comes in the form of a frightening and fantastic out-of-control adventure which Michael brings upon himself by misappropriating power.

In addition, Mrs. Banks is woefully pitted against Poppins's cosmic knowledge in "John and Barbara's Story" (*I*, Chapter IX) when she hears the twins wailing and comes to find out why. Rather than attempting to explain to Mrs. Banks that the children are disappointed because she has just told them they will eventually lose their ability to communicate with animals and the other elements of nature, Poppins gives her a more plausible human answer that it is probably teething pains. This suits Mrs. Banks's spiritual and philosophical limitations, so when she tries to console the twins

about their "naughty teeth" she only increases their distress and causes the starling at the nursery window to laugh at her foolishness. Baby John, however, who "had good manners, and was fond of his Mother and remembered what was due to her" judges her more compassionately:

It was not her fault, poor woman, that she always said the wrong thing. It was just, he reflected, that she did not understand. So to show that he forgave her, he turned over on his back, and very dolefully, sniffing back his tears, he picked up his right foot in both hands and ran his toes along his open mouth. . . .

"There, you see, Mary Poppins! They're quite good again. I can always comfort them." (144)

In this scene, Mrs. Banks is not only ignorant of the real cause of the twins' distress but she also overestimates her maternal competencies. Moreover, the babies are superior in understanding to their mother as Mary Poppins is superior in knowledge to the children, but the comic effect is created at the expense of the mother.

Mrs. Banks appears in a similarly diminished position again in "Christmas Shopping" (*I*) when the children have returned from an unexpected shopping experience with one of the Pleiades, Maia, a fairy-like star child, who magically descended from the heavens to shop for her sisters at the very same store. Later when Michael relates the occurrence to his mother and asks her if they could have

imagined such a wondrous event, Mrs. Banks responds sympathetically but cautiously, saying perhaps they did: "We imagine strange and lovely things, my darlings" (192). Yet this tender moment is quickly undercut by an abrupt shift of focus to Poppins who is now minus the gloves she gave to the star-child, and when Mrs. Banks is surprised to hear that Mary has parted with them, Poppins quips that she does what she likes with them. While this statement saves face for Poppins, it also asserts the reality of the encounter with Maia in the eyes of the children and the reader. In such ways, Mrs. Banks is "well-meaning but hopelessly out of touch with reality. Which is to say, magic" (Hoffeld 9).

A few more examples illustrate the subtle emotional abuse the children and Mr. Banks contribute to Mrs. Banks's characterization. The last chapter in *Mary Poppins*, "West Wind," opens with Mr. Banks roaring about who put his black bag in the study where he could not find it. Mrs. Banks tells the truth but feels obligated to suffer for it:

"You did, my dear, when you took the Income Tax papers out of it last night," said Mrs. Banks.

Mr. Banks gave her such a hurt look that she wished she had been less tactless and had said she put it there herself. (194-95)

Later when Mrs. Banks becomes outraged and cross because Poppins leaves without so much as a warning, apology, or reason, she complains of her behavior disparagingly and vows never to employ Poppins again if she ever comes back. When the two older children hear this, they set upon the mother with their own recriminations:

"Oh, Mother!" said Jane reproachfully.

"You are a very cruel woman," said Michael, clenching his fist, as though at any minute he would have to strike her.

"Children, I am ashamed of you--really I am! To want back anybody who has treated your Mother so badly. I'm utterly shocked."

Jane burst into tears.

"Mary Poppins is the only person I want in the world!" Michael wailed, and flung himself on to the floor.

"Really, children, really! I don't understand you. Do be good, I beg you. There's nobody to look after you tonight. I have to go out to dinner and it's Ellen's Day Off. I shall have to send Mrs. Brill up." And she kissed them absent-mindedly, and went away with an anxious little line on her forehead. . . . (203-204)

Jane and Michael's impassioned defense of Poppins generated by the intensity of their feelings of loss unleashes a childlike cruelty, leaving Mrs. Banks at the end of this book, not only inconvenienced by Mary's freedom of will and movement, but seemingly rejected by her children's preference for Mary Poppins. Yet by being so preoccupied with her own schedule and self-centered needs, Mrs. Banks is not able to share in the depth of her children's emotional

loss over Mary's departure and would probably be unable to console them anyway. Indeed she is excluded from their hopeful stance at the end when she sends up the cook, Mrs. Brill, who casually translates Mary's "Au revoir" note to the children who regard it as a bona fide promise.

Mrs. Banks's treatment by her family members does not improve much in *Mary Poppins Comes Back*. At the end of the second book, Mrs. Banks has not grown much as a character. When the children are admiring and contemplating the new star they have witnessed Mary Poppins become through the launching of a wheeling carousel in the park, Mrs. Banks is allowed to appreciate the new natural wonder momentarily. But when Mrs. Brill interrupts to inform her that Poppins has left again without warning, she becomes easily distracted and begins to worry about the mundane activities of who will wash and dress of the children. Mr. Banks, staring at the new star with the children, remains unfazed by the news and wrapped in awe exclaiming:

"It will look through their window at night!" cried Mr. Banks happily. "That's better than washing and dressing."

He turned back to the telescope.

"Won't you, my Wonder? My Marvel? My Beauty!" he said looking up at the star. (267-68)

As Mary Poppins is elevated to the heights of stardom, perhaps in association with Maia, Apollo, and the likes of other heavenly bodies, Mrs. Banks is stunted by a perspective that keeps her spiritually earthbound as a figure to be tolerated, if not pitied. These traits and Travers's comic treatment make her a mother figure not to be emulated but excluded from the realm of Poppins's wonderful world.

To assume, however, that Travers used her own mother as a model for Mrs. Banks because she drew upon her childhood nannies as inspirations in her fiction would be a miscalculation. Travers expresses admiration for her mother's "flashes of inspiration, when the streak of poetry in her Scottish blood broke up the daily pattern" with unexpected picnic breakfasts far away, or picnics on the floor at home ("Radical Innocence" 38). Travers recalls these incidents from childhood days on their sugar plantation home in Queensland:

The sudden lively moments! She would have called them merely moods, but they seem to me now a kind of wisdom, as though she knew instinctively that nothing brings so much energy as the breaks in a regular routine. . . . it was from her we learned, far more than from our less dependable father, to be ready for the unexpected, even to the point of knowing that truth can be juggled with. (38)

Such a testimony suggests that in many ways Travers's mother appears to be more like Mary Poppins whom Reckford describes as

that Dionysian-like "wonderful transforming energy" breaking through the routine of ordinary daily life and "bringing the characters into a world of magic where the laws of nature are suspended and normal relations are changed too . . . " (103). Yet the poignant, reflective essay, "The Interviewer," originally written by Travers for the theme of The Creative Response in *Parabola* (1988), reveals a more melancholic side of her young widowed mother who suddenly leaves her children one stormy evening:

For she was standing by the door, her blue robe hanging from her shoulders, hair in a walnut braid down her back, her face white and distraught.

"I have had enough. I can stand no more. I am going down to the creek," she said. And she went out, closing the door behind her. (*What the Bee Knows* 204)

Travers proceeds to describe in the article the pain and the anger felt by the ten year-old eldest child left in charge of her younger siblings during that uncertain period of waiting for their mother's return: "And I knew what they needed from me was what we all needed from her--security, reassurance" (205). To comfort them, the young artist spins a tale of a magic, speckled horse who, like Mary Poppins, can do many wonderful things and to whom no harm can come. The mother eventually returns, but the eldest child having weathered an emotional storm of her own, has grown

stronger through the experience by relying on her own resources of artistic creation. Travers adds that the child subsequently reacts defiantly in a subtle manner by not obeying a simple directive from her mother. But in her inimitable style, she concludes the essay by portraying the interviewer as accepting "a fallacious account of a book's begetting transmogrified into fact" (208). Like Mary Poppins, Travers denies it ever happened that way.

Referring to Travers's childhood rift in her relationship with her mother over this matter, however, Martha Heyneman believes that the author's remembering of this incident "in the light of mature understanding caused the barrier at last to dissolve" (98). It is also interesting to note that Travers dedicated *Mary Poppins* to her mother, and of dedications she believed: "A dedication, after all, is not a starting point, but rather a last grand flourish. You do not write a book for this or that person. You offer it to him when it is finished" (*On Not Writing for Children* 62). Although Travers says the stories about Poppins had been with her for some time, she began penning the first book while recuperating from what was thought to be tuberculosis. As a young writer, not yet thirty but facing the possibility of an early demise, Travers's dedication of the book to her mother seems all the more poignant. Such connections

strongly indicate that Travers's mother, as well as her nannies, was an important inspiration for the character of Mary Poppins.

Travers's insight into the potential difficulties of motherhood may be suggested by her tale of the Red Cow, a maternal animal character with whom Mary Poppins establishes a sympathetic connection (*I*). The tale of the Red Cow who is searching for her lost enchanted star may speak for the situation of those human mothers who find the security or routine of domestic life too confining for their creative yearnings. The story begins when the Banks children notice a cow walking down their lane and slowly poking her head over all the gates, as if looking for something. When the children exclaim how very funny the incident is, Poppins makes a matrilineal connection with the storytelling tradition when she replies: "It's not funny at all. I know that cow. She was a great friend of my Mother's and I'll thank you to speak politely of her" (66). The children then coax her to tell more about this searching cow.

At that point Poppins slips naturally into the role of the storyteller who transmits oral culture in the female tradition that Travers refers to in "Only Connect." Although Travers speaks about old wives telling tales, it is clear that Mary's tale of the Red Cow, told to Mary by her mother, belongs to the female storytelling tradition

that Travers values:

But I am one who believes in old wives' tales and that it is the proper function of old wives to tell tales. . . . The tales have to be told in order that we may understand that in the long run, whatever it may be, every man must become the hero of his own story; his own fairy tale, if you like, a real fairy tale. (198)

The audience learns that the Red Cow was a very important and prosperous cow who lived contentedly in a field of "buttercups the size of saucers and dandelions rather larger than brooms" where "Her world was bounded by green hedges and the sky and she knew nothing of what lay beyond these" (I 67). Furthermore, she was very respectable and acted as a perfect lady who knew "What was What" and could clearly judge a thing as either black or white (67). Her days were busy with giving lessons to her current daughter, the Red Calf, who had been one of many offspring, on proper conduct, mooing, and how to select the best blades of grass. But one night as the Red Cow lay thinking that all her days would continue as pleasantly and routinely as these, "adventure, as she afterwards told my Mother, was stalking her" (68).

That night when the stars and moon themselves appeared transformed as dandelions and a buttercup: "the Red Cow stood up suddenly and began to dance. She danced wildly and beautifully in

perfect time, though she had no music to go by" (68). This astonishes the Red Cow herself who thought it quite an improper thing to do for such a model cow as she. "And she went on dancing, and thoroughly enjoying herself" (69). When she grew tired, however, and tried to stop she found she could not. She could not even lie down beside her little calf because her legs kept "capering and prancing" (69). The next morning the Red Calf had to feed herself because the mother could not stop long enough to help her.

When the Red Cow becomes so distracted after a week of continuous dancing, she decides to seek the patriarchal advice of the King. She is received at court rather hastily by the irritable King who does not wish to be detained for his barber's appointment, and she cannot stop dancing despite his command to do so. After apologizing, she tells the King she has come to seek his help. He asks her what it feels like to be dancing all the time, and the Red Cow answers that it feels funny but rather pleasant: "as if laughter were running up and down inside me" (72). Then the King notices that a star is stuck on one of her horns and suggests the star be removed to solve the problem, but the star does not budge even with many courtiers pulling at it. The Royal then instructs his Secretary to consult the Encyclopedia "on cows with stars on their horns," but all the

Secretary can find is a reference to "the Cow Who Jumped Over the Moon" (75) obviously derived from the well-known nursery rhyme "Hey-Diddle Diddle." The King decides that she should jump over the moon so the star may dislodge itself in the flight. At first, the Red Cow is outraged by his suggestion because she has been taught that jumping also was "no occupation for a lady!" (75) But the King rises, and shaking his sceptre at her, questions her: " 'Do you want to go on dancing for ever? Do you want to go hungry for ever? Do you want to go sleepless for ever?' " (76).

Whether convinced by the King's argument of dire consequences, or by his royal authority, the Red Cow decides to go through with the fantastic jump. While doing so, she experiences a beautiful poetic flight filled with spinning stars and music and finally finds herself safely back in her own dandelion field. Here she is greeted lovingly by the little Red Calf who had grown so lonely without her. At first she returns to her routine gratefully, but after a few days the Red Cow begins to feel

uncomfortable and dissatisfied. . . . At last she realized she was missing her star. She had grown so used to dancing and to the happy feeling the star had given her that she wanted to do a Sailor's Hornpipe and to have the star on her horn again. (79)

This time, however, instead of going to the King, she seeks the

womanly counsel of Mary Poppins's wise Mother who advises the Red Cow to go searching for another one but not to expect "two stars to drop in the same field in one lifetime" (79). And that, Mary closes, is what the Red Cow is doing on Cherry Tree Lane this very day.

While this tale can be read solely for its delightfully simple plot and humor, a more experienced or older reader can identify the conflict it presents in the Red Cow's dilemma: dance enchantedly through the world or be confined at home by domestic duty and social propriety. Although the dancing may be a way to avoid responsibility, it may also suggest internal conflict for the female who seeks creative self-expression in ways other than biological. Some poets have used dancing as a metaphor for writing, and the fairy tale, "The Red Shoes," depicts it, as a sure cause of death if unabated, just as the King does. Red Cow did not originally seek the dancing experience but was gifted by a falling star, an act of nature, perhaps as a talent is often given. Ironically, the Red Cow remedies her immediate dilemma by re-enacting the cow's role in the nursery rhyme as the King advised but does not find happiness.

In a later article, "The Ten Shortest Stories in the World" for *Games Magazine*, Travers reveals her fascination with this rhyme:

But why did the cow jump over the moon and the
dish elope with the spoon? The irrelevance! The magic!

The ill-logic! Let us not ask for explanations. Here, sense and non-sense are dancing together. That should be enough. (*What the Bee Knows* 277)

That the rhyme is of nonsense origin is supported by the research of the Opies (203-205), and Travers's view is consistent with their findings. It is amusing to notice, however, that the King's advice is thus nonsense which the cow accepts, and it works, at least insofar as it dislodges the star but leaves the Red Cow yearning for those enchanted days. In spite of Travers's attempt to make light of any serious meaning for the rhyme, she has used it in creating a tale of longing for creative expression that belies her apparent whimsy.

Moreover, in a serious piece written much later for *Parabola* (1988) called the "The Endless Story," Travers reveals more openly, in a dialogue between lovers, the reflective and enduringly feminine nature the cow represents through the female lover's perspective:

Once when they came to a country town he stopped beside a market stall and came away bearing two small objects--a carven wooden cow and a hen--which he put into her hand. . . .

"Why these?" she asked, folding them closely to her breast.

"What else?" he said, ". . . the two most stupid of all creatures, that catch your eye and enthrall you."

"Ah, but it's these who are the wise ones! I could watch them for ever."

"You could, but that is the woman in you! But only a farmer would look at them twice and that because they are useful to him."

"But remember how thoughtful she is, the cow,
brooding, pondering, bearing all things."
(*What the Bee Knows* 224-25).

Certainly the concept of boundaries for the female is a strong undercurrent in Red Cow's tale, and the situation resurfaces in Jane's "Bad Wednesday" in *Mary Poppins Comes Back*. Taken in relation to Travers's life, it is known that Travers declined a scholarship to Sydney University to help support her widowed mother and her fatherless family (Field 41). As a young adult, she worked as an actress and dancer for a while. Although Travers never married but eventually adopted a boy, (*New York Times* C20) she did not yet have a child when she included the Red Cow's tale in the published debut of *Mary Poppins* in 1934, but a recognition of possible tensions involving artistic yearnings versus motherly desires seems to be subtly expressed in the Red Cow's quest for "adventure." Travers wisely leaves the judgment of the Cow's solution open-ended on the moral level, but she crafts a complex and sympathetic tale that moves the Banks children, and perhaps the reader, to share in the hope that the Red Cow will find her star again. Fortunately for Travers, her motherly desire to bring up children was granted when, without the necessity of marriage, she adopted the son who

subsequently gave her three grandchildren. In addition, her travels as a lecturer and artist in residency at various American colleges put her in close communication with many young adults. These achievements, coupled with her successful writing career, may be the true happy ending of the Red Cow's search for balance in a complex world where social roles and personal desires often contend.

In contrast, a mothering figure who does not experience the dissonance of the Red Cow in performing her domestic chores for the little ones she tends is the taciturn Bird Woman, who curiously becomes an inspiration for Jane's storytelling talent. In the first book, her speech consists only of the chant-like recital of "Feed the Birds, Tuppence a Bag!" but Jane, the eldest Banks child, provides an imaginative script that portrays the Bird Woman as the ideal, providential mother. Visiting the Bird Woman and feeding the birds with a bag of her special bread crumbs in front of Saint Paul's Cathedral is always an exciting pleasure the Banks children anticipate when going into the city with Mary Poppins. The artistic Jane, moved by the terse but serene woman's devotion to the birds, invents a simple but tender story for what happens at night when all the people have gone home, and it is time for the birds to retire too. The story is always welcomed by Michael who ritualistically asks her

to tell it whenever they visit because "the story was really hers" (*I* 109). Jane narrates that at night all the birds descend around the Bird Woman, preen themselves, and then fly three times around her head before settling on her. The Bird Woman smooths their feathers and tells each one to be a good bird in bird language and "spreads out her skirts, as a mother hen spreads out her wings, and the birds go creep, creep, creeping underneath" (109-110) to rest safely until morning.

The Bird Woman appears human, but her loving care for the birds suggest a saintly aura about her as she communes with them, as Mary does, in bird language. Clearly, for Jane, the Bird Woman is an ideal mother. The motherly appeal of this figure to Jane is consistent with one of her favorite daydreaming activities, that of imagining she is a nesting mother bird: "Now I am a bird!" she said to herself. "I have just laid seven lovely white eggs and I am sitting with my wings over them, brooding. . . . Then, out will pop seven little chicks" (*II* 55-56). Jane's fantasy in turn reflects a favorite past time of Travers as a child. In one interview, the author tells how grateful she was of her mother's toleration of her own imaginative playing when as a child she spent hours nesting and laying eggs (Field 40). The projection of this cherished fantasy onto

the character of Jane, who then creates her story about the character, allows the Bird Woman to emerge as an admired mother figure who, like Poppins, lives in harmony with nature, but without the benefit of flight, remains contentedly earth-centered.

Thus, Travers presents an array of motherly figures who operate both within the patriarchal system and independent of it. In functioning, they may be cruel, comical, ambivalent, negligent, and ineffectual, or serene and devoted like the Bird Woman. Although these mothers may be linked to the literary prototypes Travers lists in "Grimm's Women" as derived from "Kali, the Black One, the supreme Mother-Goddess of India, who is life-giver and life-taker," (59) a goodly portion of Travers's motherly characters issues from her own experiences enhanced by a fertile artistic imagination. From such melding, Poppins emerges above all of them as a powerful superwoman who can raise baby macaws and human children better than their own parents, and still have time and opportunity to enjoy a place among the stars. Balancing earthly matters with the arcane, she is the magical Great Exception who handles it all with aplomb.

Chapter IV

Self-Concepts and Female Protagonists: Interfacing Mary and Jane

The self-concepts of female protagonists in literature is a longstanding topic of feminist criticism. Often the characterization of a female protagonist is analyzed for aspects such as her self-love or self-loathing, feelings or actions reflecting power or powerlessness, choice or the lack of it, and access to or denial of speech. Such analyses can apply to characters in both realistic and fantastic fiction, traditional or contemporary. Early feminist criticism focused on how male writers represented women in literature, whereas a more recent trend treats the way women are represented by women writers. For example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's examination of nineteenth century women writers illustrates how Charlotte and Emily Bronte through their respective female characters, Bertha Rochester of *Jane Eyre* and Catherine Earnshaw Linton of *Wuthering Heights*, suggest madness as an outcome of an angry or divided female self; a thread twentieth century writer, Jean Rhys weaves into *Wide Sargasso Sea* for her protagonist as well. Kate Chopin's Edna

Pontellier of *The Awakening* is a female character who ultimately finds release from an unfulfilled life only in death. In striking contrast, modern women writers of the fantastic are offering readers independent, competent, and self-actualizing female protagonists like Marion Zimmer Bradley's powerful, magical female characters in *The Mists of Avalon*, and Sherry Tepper's Marjorie Westriding, explorer of the universe in *Grass* and cosmic prophetess in *Raising the Stones*.

Arriving midway in this stream of female literary designs is Travers's Mary Poppins. Granted, she is the outstanding character around whom the series revolves, but to classify her as a classic protagonist engaged in personal conflict and struggle is mistaken. Both readers and Mary know that by her own yardstick she is already "perfect" (*II*) as well as magically empowered. Aside from her skirmishes with minor adversaries like the snobbish Miss Lark or pompous public servants, Mary herself encounters no major obstacles to overcome, although her temporary shrinking and imprisonment of the overbearing Miss Andrews plays out as a small victory over the evil of oppression. Her chief battles then are helping her charges (and sometimes the various townspeople who through Mary's intervention are invited to break free of societal restrictions or self-imposed limitations) to look for the wisdom,

truth and joy they are capable of finding in the world and embracing within themselves. Strictly speaking, Mary Poppins does not always function as the protagonist of the tales.

Jane and Michael, however, who occupy more of the tales than either the twins or newcomer Annabel, do have problems appropriate to their childlike situations, and they, together or as individuals, often become the protagonists of the self-contained chapters. As the eldest, Jane bears a greater share of responsibility, and the "Bad Wednesday" chapter in *Mary Poppins Comes Back* not only allows her to rebel but eventually to work through this conflict. Although Bergsten views it as a counterpart chapter of Michael's adventure in "Bad Tuesday" of the first book, from a feminist perspective there are discernible and somewhat disturbing gender differences in the author's treatment of the two experiences. In this chapter the motif of domestic enclosure for the female recurs. For example, in an effort to recreate the trip to the four directions of the world the children had previously enjoyed under the aegis of Mary Poppins, Michael uses Poppins's magic compass without permission and effects an out-of-control whirlwind trip where all the former pleasant acquaintances he had met have become hostile. Although he has illegitimately appropriated the power of the compass, his

adventure is characterized by traveling around the world, or moving outwardly in all four directions, whereas Jane's frightening adventure, also generated by a bout of anger, involves the threat of permanent enclosure inside the Victorian "tertiary world" (Watson) of a Royal Doulton China Bowl. In addition, much of Travers's diction in this chapter reinforces frightful feelings of entrapment and enclosure, motifs Lissa Paul says feminist critics have observed as matching images in women's and children's literature (150).

Ironically, Jane enters the world of the bowl by hurling her much treasured paint box, an instrument of her own creative expression, at a ticking clock which she perceives to be mocking her because she has been excluded from a tea-time visit for her petulance. Her act of anger causes the nearby plate to crack across the knee of one of the three boys playing driver and horses in its depiction. When a voice responds with "I say--that hurt!" (66) she is puzzled at first. Realizing that the voice is coming from the bowl and seeing that the injured fellow is now holding his knee as the other two look on compassionately, she engages in conversation with them, and they invite her to join them. Persuading herself that this adventure could be far more exciting than going to tea at Miss Lark's, Jane decides to enter. As she puts out her hand for assistance,

however, "Valentine's hand *closed round* her wrist and pulled her towards the Bowl" (69, italics mine).

Once inside she finds herself, as Red Cow did, in a pleasant sunlit meadow filled with daisies. She revels with the boys in their game of horses and driver for a while, but when she notices how far away the rim of the bowl seems, she abruptly decides she should go back. Valentine, however, entices her to visit their home beyond the meadow scene by telling her that he too has a paint box she might want to see. Jane asks if it has Chinese White which she lacks and greatly desires to acquire. He answers yes, and "against her will Jane allowed him to draw her onwards" (70). Passing through a foreboding woods of dark alder boughs and dead leaves, Jane finds herself before an old, huge ivy-covered stone house which "seemed to lean towards her threateningly" (70).

Shouting "Here she is!" (71), Valentine excitedly takes Jane into the hall and pulls her up the stairs to meet the remaining residents, a very old, bony withered toothless grandfather figure with steely eyes who cackles while talking, and a girl in an old-fashioned costume, Christina, who is slightly taller than the twin boys. A mother or grandmother is conspicuously absent from this familial gathering, but the presence of the young girl who is older

than Jane suggests to the reader that Jane has not been brought here to fulfill a maternal role. Indeed the grandfather informs Jane that she will never have to bear the burdens of being the eldest again, which she complained about so much back in the house on Cherry Tree Lane. Yet the old man stipulates: "But I shan't allow any tempers here!" (72); so anger is to be off limits for Jane.

When Jane rejects the proposition and expresses her anxious desire to return home, the grandfather counters that she cannot go back to that "horrible place" where she was so unhappy. Jane insists she must, but he authoritatively declares, "You've cracked our Bowl. You must take the consequences" (74). Jane tries to bargain her way out, finally offering the feminine gesture of returning to marry Valentine when he grows up, but the grandfather only laughs derisively, and Valentine sadly explains that he grew up a long time ago. Jane is confused, and the old man reveals that she is caught in the Past of sixty years ago before the existence of her own parents, so there is no home on Cherry Tree Lane to return to.

As Jane manages through her tears to cry out for Mary Poppins with a voice that "echoed wildly through the stone corridors" (75), the old man orders the children to, "Quick! Hold her close! Surround her!" (75). Jane experiences the four of them pressing close about

her and then feels a hand pulling her away from their circling arms. Of course, it is Poppins responding to Jane's pleas and genuine repentance: "Mary Poppins! I'm sorry I was cross! Oh, Mary Poppins, help me, help me!" (75) When Jane finds herself safe and warm back in the Banks family nursery, "her terror died away. A tide of happiness swept over her" (78). In retrospect, she responds: " 'It couldn't have been I who was so cross!' . . . It must have been somebody else' " (78). Thus, Jane's conscience will not allow her to legitimize the anger she feels nor recognize herself when she expresses it.

Then Jane notices in the bowl's revised design her own handkerchief tied around Valentine's knee and Mary Poppins's initialed scarf which had fallen to the ground. Convinced by these confirmations that it all did happen, and grateful to Mary for her deliverance from an entombment in time and the possible severing of all her emotional attachments, Jane rushes to Mary and promises she will never be naughty again. She also eagerly and cheerfully offers to do any chores or errands she complained of before. At first Mary rebuffs Jane's offers with her usual sarcastic responses, but eventually she grants her emotional absolution. Overall, the experience has moved Jane to embrace her identity as the eldest

child who is expected to be helpful and responsible in the nursery and household, as the Goff family expected Travers to be, especially after the death of her father and later when she became a young wage earner (Field 41).

But while Jane's act of repentance achieves a peaceful harmony within herself, its treatment contrasts with Travers's treatment of Michael's crossness in "Bad Tuesday" which lacks the profusion of repentance Jane exhibits. Although Michael too expresses relief and gratitude when rescued by Mary, he is easily able to slip into a peaceful sleep in the security of the household, after saying: "I've been so very naughty and I feel so good" (*I* 102). One speculates if the author's treatment of Michael's situation can be attributed to his youthful inexperience at repentance, or to an acceptance of the "Boys will be boys" mentality on the part of the author. Unlike Jane's affective display of repentance, and resolution to sin no more, which is emphasized through her dramatic declarations as a character, Michael's remorse for being naughty is narrated to the reader by the author's omniscient but less emotive third person point of view, effecting a more merciful, gentle treatment. Thus, Jane's liberating conversion appears to require more guilt and atonement than Michael's simple recognition of his misbehavior. Is Travers, either

unconsciously or otherwise, suggesting through Jane's experience that more penalties and consequences may be demanded of females who dare to express anger over their personal situations, or is it simply the lot of the eldest to bear the greater share of personal sacrifices? The story supports both perspectives. While these tales of transgression may seem similar on the surface, they are not mirror experiences. The closer reading discovers that each has gender related aspects which may be considered from an adult literary point of view for connotations concerning role expectations.

If Poppins is not the protagonist in these two frightening experiences, can she be conceived as the antagonist? That is plausible when she is perceived as the perpetrator of these frightening fantastic events, or at the least an accomplice, even if her intentions are to teach the children a lesson designed for their own good. Such deliberate manipulations, to make the children suffer in order to appreciate what they have, may seem a cruel act, but it would be consistent with Travers's comment regarding Poppins in the Disney version which had "missed the point" by toning down "the darker side of the nanny's character" (*Fort Lauderdale Sun Sentinel* 6B). Possibly this darker side is related to the "harsher, more masculine" quality Bergsten perceives in Mary's role (26).

This streak of seeming cruelty in Poppins relates ironically to Gilead's complaint that Poppins leaves her charges more debilitated than encouraged by reality through her refusal to define "the use of enchantment" (100). Gilead's view seems applicable when Mary's presence allows them to participate in joyful, delightful adventures until her sudden departures inflict a sense of loss for them, but in these frightening episodes Mary leads the children to an appreciation of the reality of their secure home life. As for the suffering Mary causes the children when she must leave, Travers has explained: "She doesn't hold back anything from them. When they beg her not to depart, she reminds them that nothing lasts forever" (Burness 217). Mary's lesson may be a hard one for the children, but Travers can identify with their pain when she recalls in her essay *On Not Writing for Children*: "but who are we but the child we were? We have been wounded, scarred and dirtied over. But we are essentially still that child" (63). Mary may sometimes exert her power to do unpleasant deeds, but she opts not to explain her actions and that silence seems to annoy critics more than the children who pursue her in her fictional world or her reading devotees. When Mary is pressed by Jane to tell who she would want to be if she were not herself, her self-concept remains fully intact as "she instantly

replies, 'Mary Poppins' " (Fisher 218). Thus Mary accepts herself confidently, whether functioning as protagonist or antagonist.

Although Poppins tends to all the Banks children, she seems to have a particular affinity for Jane, who like Travers was the eldest daughter in her family. Yet even though Jane remains of preschool age throughout the series, the relationship between Jane and Mary Poppins is more than one of mere power-wielding nanny and her charge. The strongest evidence of this occurs at the end of the first book when Poppins departs without comment but specifies in a note to the children that she has left the compass for Michael and a curly framed portrait of herself for Jane. The portrait binds Jane and Mary in a special relationship by serving not only as a loving remembrance but as an inspirational model for Jane to emulate. Indeed, later that evening when Jane consoles her young brother by allowing him to sleep holding the portrait, she imitates Poppins as "she tucked him in just as Mary Poppins used to do. . . ." (206).

Other incidents suggest that Jane and Mary share a special bond of identification that reinforces Jane's capabilities rather than her inadequacies as a child protagonist. For example, in creating her story of the Bird Woman, Jane exhibits Mary's talent for storytelling. In the Christmas shopping episode, Mary allows Jane to influence

her actions, something she seldom permits the children to do. When they encounter the thinly-clad Maia in the store, Jane declares that there is no present for Maia and begins rummaging through her parcels for a gift. Poppins responds to Jane's kind intention by sacrificing her fur-trimmed gloves, even though she vainly admired them earlier in the day as the perfect finishing touch for her outfit:

“You be quiet,” she said to Jane in her snappiest voice. At the same time she whipped off her new gloves and thrust one on to each of Maia's hands.

“There!” she said gruffly. “It's cold today. You'll be glad of them.” (*I* 189)

The snappy tone in Mary's reply to Jane is the proud nanny's way of admitting that the compassionate act was Jane's idea. Later when Poppins exclaims to Mrs. Banks that she gave the gloves away of her own free will, readers know she was prompted by Jane's sensitive and perceptive concern. Thus, in this scene the child subtly becomes the teacher. These instances of role-modeling and role exchanging between Jane and Mary suggest a gendered relationship reflecting the wise-woman and younger woman literary archetype. And although Jane will never inherit Mary's privileged cosmic knowledge or magical powers, she receives the benefits of Mary's wisdom, confident example, and serious regard. In addition, their fictional friendship may reflect Travers's appreciation of the special

relationship she enjoyed with an unidentified “grown-up friend” at age eleven. While affirming the love of her parents, she shares:

How wonderful it was to be able to have somebody other than your parents that you could talk to, who treated you as though you were a human being, with your own proper place in the world. . . . the extra friend was a tremendous plus. (Burness 218-19)

If such a biographical link to Travers’s creative process is valid, then the text may be an example of the kind of “fluid” female text

Judith Keagan Gardiner speaks of when she claims that:

the woman writer uses her text, particularly centering on a female hero, as part of a continuing process involving her own self-definition and her empathic definition with her character. (187)

In Travers’s case, however, the author seems to identify with both Poppins and Jane who share the female protagonist roles as well. Travers has, after all, recognized Jane as the “sensitive one” (Cott 209) and cast her as an artist, storyteller, and eldest child. As for Mary Poppins, Travers hints in a 1986 interview, of a personal connection to this fantastic lady when she says:

My conception of her has changed in some ways because I’ve grown and she’s grown with me, . . . I recognize a mixture of arrogance and poetry, and underlying both, a certain invincible integrity. (Sikes 23)

Travers’s creation of these two female protagonists is an intricate blend of real mother, idealized mother and young girl. At the

conscious literary level, it offers her unique interpretation of what she believes fairy tales can tell us about woman and her triple role in life, which encompasses passages from maiden, mother, and wise crone (*Only Connect* 199). On a psychological level, however, the blend may relate to a deeper, more personal aspect of Travers's developing self at the time of its composition:

Thus the author may define herself through her text while creating her female hero. This can be a positive, therapeutic relationship, like learning to be a mother, that is, learning to experience oneself as one's own cared for child and as one's own caring mother while simultaneously learning to experience one's creation as other, as separate from self. (Gardiner 187)

If true, Mary and Jane are more complex than their mere surfaces.

Chapter V

Travers as a Storyteller and the Question of Feminist Aesthetics

To claim that a feminist aesthetic underlies Travers's plot structures for the fantasies is debatable, for as Rita Felski points out, "[T]he variety of feminist positions makes it difficult to establish absolute and unambiguous criteria for determining what constitutes a feminist narrative" (13). Moreover, as Moynihan and Shaner observe, Travers's use of episodic structure is similar to other "magic adventure fantasy," not exclusive to women writers (132). They note, however, that each chapter contains a complete event, and though the pattern of events may be similar in both books

this pattern of episodes is not mere formula. It is a construct, almost a maze, that the children walk each time, coming in each book a little closer to the heart of the matter, the secret of magic in themselves. (135)

While the metaphor of a maze applies in this instance and for other romances and fantasies as well, Travers's artistic conception of a web-like structure for fantasy, as found in her comment about fairyland from *About the Sleeping Beauty*, might apply more aptly:

"How far is it to fairyland? Nearer by far than Babylon. It intersects our mortal world at every point and at every second. The two of them together make one web woven fine" (8). Intended or not, most of the episodic adventures in *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* follow a webbed pattern in that the Banks residence serves as the central returning point where the reality of each magical experience, corresponding to a vertical thread, is usually pondered and generally verified by some residual evidence. Only a few of the twenty-two chapters in the two books deviate somewhat from this design by taking place at the Banks residence itself. They include "The Dancing Cow" (*I*), which employs a story within a story framework; "Bad Wednesday," when Jane enters the tertiary world of the Royal Doulton bowl in the Banks household (*II*), "The New One," in which Annabel, the Banks's newborn, relates in the nursery the story of her pre-birth existence but shortly afterwards loses her innate capacity to commune with the elements of nature (*II*); and "Miss Andrew's Lark," in which Poppins creates a turnabout world by imprisoning Miss Andrews in a bird cage that gets spirited away by her formerly imprisoned lark (*II*).

The web-like movement of action outward from the center and back to the center in the bulk of the chapters may be similar to the

webbed structure Donovan and Ammons identify in their studies of Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* as "derived from women's culture and women's epistemology" (105).⁵ According to them, this structure, in contrast to the traditional masculinely conceived Aristotelian structure stressing linear and progressive narrative, "is nuclear: the narrative moves out from one base to a given point and back again, out to another point, and back again and so forth like arteries on a spider's web" (105). To further support such a female connection to the structure, Donovan cites Carol Gilligan's conclusion, in her research on moral reasoning in men and women, "that the images of hierarchy and the web represent basic differences in the male and female modes of knowledge" (Donovan 104-05).⁶

Whether or not Travers's web-like structures for these fantasies can be linked to a feminist model, such as Donovan and Ammons posit for Jewett, they are, nevertheless, a manifestation of her personal style and creative process which favor a "thinking is linking" mode ("Only Connect" 184). As a result, the web-like structure allows Travers to reintroduce in her sequels related strands such as a broken cup from an earlier episode which is later restored in a place where nothing is lost, or characters like the Bird

Woman who eventually expands her speech expressions as she connects more with the other characters. While some critics might share Nodelman's limited view that *Mary Poppins* lacks an "involving plot" (9) as they might expect of the traditional linear quest fantasy, the web-like structure actually works to foster the continued involvement of its sympathetic readers, for rather than offering a final closure at the end of each book, reunion is promised and affirmed by another awaited issue.

A further complexity develops if one applies Charlotte Spivack's observation that a "narrative device favored by women fantasy writers is the circular as opposed to the linear plot" (9) to Travers's plot structures in the five major Poppins fantasies. Indeed the first two books both begin with Mary Poppins descending from the sky and end with her ascending back into it. Bergsten's thorough discussion of Poppins's ascensions and returns supports an origin found in the nature myth cycles (28). Prominent among these is the myth of Demeter, the Earth-goddess of grains, who mourning the loss of her daughter abducted by powerful male gods, manages to exert a sway of her own power by devastating the crops, thereby moving Zeus to pity mankind and allow a reunion between mother and daughter for part of the year, during which the subsequent

restored vegetation of the earth reflects their shared joy. While seemingly simple in its plot, this myth offers a story structure that reinforces a “continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle” (Gilligan 23) with a special emphasis on the mother and daughter relationship. Travers may have adopted the cyclic form to provide the option for Mary’s return, but Mary’s eventual return reflects her continued concern for the welfare of the Banks children and reaffirms the bond between herself and the children just as the myth sustains between mother and daughter. Travers’s adaptations of this myth for the first two Poppins books strongly suggest that relationships are a main concern.

Bergsten observes that in the third sequel (*Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, 1943) the ascension motif varies when Poppins exits through a door in the reflection of a nursery window, a device he associates more with fairy tales than myth (30). The fourth and fifth sequels (*Mary Poppins in the Park*, 1952 and *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane*, 1982) lack fantastic arrivals or sudden departures by Mary because their episodes are conceived as having occurred during the visits of the previous books. Thus, if these latter tales can be considered as additional horizontal story line connections to their predecessors, then the web structure appears to be a recurrent

and favored design for the Poppins fantasies.

Granting that a web-like structure characterizes Travers's Poppins narratives does not, however, prove that such a structure is uniquely a feminist aesthetic, defined by Felski as a "privileged relationship between female gender and a particular kind of literary structure, style or form" (19). Furthermore, despite keen observations made by critics like Donovan and Ammons regarding the web structure adopted by certain female writers, and Spivack who views the web as a central image for Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* fantasies (66), male writer and fantasist J. R. R. Tolkien also employs the image for fantasy when referring to "the very web of the story" (70). In fact, the web has long served as a metaphor for story telling itself. In a final analysis, it is doubtful that the web-like plot structure belongs exclusively to a feminine consciousness, but as used in Travers's Poppins fantasies, it befits her values of relationships and recovery.

Jane Mickelson hints in an article written after Travers's death in 1996, that at one point the author wanted to finish off the web of the Poppins tales. She claims "Travers planned to write the final full-length book of the series, with a working title of *Good-Bye, Mary Poppins*, but her publishers protested too loudly" (641). No

doubt Travers's suppression as a writer in this matter was not because she was a woman, but because she had proven to be a lucrative spinner of the tales for them. Mickelson does not reveal at what point in Travers's life the desire to end the series emerged, but Demers observes that even in the last sequel, *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1988), Travers upholds "the importance of the unresolved, unclosed narrative" (72). Travers's artistic choice, or deference, whichever the case may be, to employ the open-ended narrative should not be viewed as merely pragmatic. My research has shown that deeply felt, personal experiences complexly processed by Travers permeate *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back*; many of which relate to the concerns of feminist criticism today. Furthermore, like Mary's rapport with the Banks children, Travers regarded her readers just as dearly. Ultimately, Travers's reliance on the open-ended narrative in the series works to its best advantage: it beckons writer and reader alike with the promise of journeying, one more time together, through the playing fields of the imagination.

VI

Conclusion

It is true that Travers has credited much of her success as a young writer to the influence of established European male authors who encouraged her early writing endeavors. Working from the solid traditions of mythology and fairy tales, she successfully utilized many of their literary elements in the *Mary Poppins* fantasies. What has not been so apparent are the unique adaptations she made by intertwining these elements with her personal impressions and experiences from a feminine perspective. And although Travers was always cautious in labeling herself with any identification as a feminist, the first two books of the *Mary Poppins* series are rife with concerns that declared feminist critics deem important. The prevalence of the motherly figures and the variety of characterizations they depict, particularly in the first book, suggest that the vocation of motherhood was a riveting subject for Travers at the time of its composition. The topic is far less evident in her third sequel, *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* published in 1943.

Travers professes that the character of Mary Poppins did not originate from her conscious mind, but Travers subsequently thrust the prosaic figure of the British nanny to new heights in fantastic literature by merging the nanny's domestic status with a cosmic function. Although Travers touted the array of female characters that fairy tales provide for young women seeking direction and shape for the development of their powers and talents ("Grimm's Women"), she, nevertheless, drew upon the idiosyncrasies of her former nannies, whom she esteemed as "Childhood Heroes," and incorporated many of their qualities into her fictional heroine, Mary Poppins, with whom she also identified herself and her mother.

Travers treats the matter of how females might exert power through a variety of characters. Successfully asserting power without inhibition are Poppins and her superhuman cohorts, but the overbearing human characters of Miss Andrew and Miss Lark find their oppressing powers thwarted or deflected while the mundane Mrs. Banks lacks it entirely. Where young Jane fits along this continuum is ambiguous. Like any child, she can exert the power of cruelty as when she rails against her mother or treats Michael meanly. Yet not to be underestimated, Jane's empathy influences

Mary to sacrifice her gloves to Maia and consoles her little brother Michael with the portrait after Mary's departure (*I*).

Female creativity in the arts is illustrated primarily through Poppins's storytelling expertise and Jane's fledging talent inspired by their visits to the Bird Woman. Jane enjoys painting too, but her envy for Chinese white paint and her anger lead to an almost overwhelming experience in the Royal Doulton Bowl episode. The stories never establish how good a painter Jane is, but her strongest artistic talent promises to be that of storytelling like Poppins and Travers. Encountering a soulful search for artistic creation, is Red Cow, who must choose between the joyful movement of dance and the security of domestic confinement. In contrast, Mrs. Corry magically transforms paper stars into fiery orbs, and powerful Nellie Rubina engenders organic growth through painted images.

Can Travers be found among her gallery of fictional female artists? Has she conjured sequels of the Poppins tales with formulaic ease as her fantastic superwomen do, or has she, like the Red Cow and young Jane, struggled with the artistic endeavor with more complexity than is first apparent? Travers's unresolved narratives may seem too convenient for the cynical, and her mastery of web-like story telling may be undervalued by critics who prefer

high fantasy or quest plots, but she successfully proved her power in the marketplace and in the hearts of her readers as a competent woman writer of fantasy. Though she may have perceived herself as a handmaiden in an Apollonian court, *Mary Poppins* and *Mary Poppins Comes Back* reveal Travers to be a Sibyl who utters messages of her own making.

Notes

¹ English and American publications apparently retained Mary Shepard's illustrations, but various translations have substituted their own renderings. For example, in the Russian translation, Travers observed of Poppins: "[T]hey drew her as a little match-stick type of figure; wispy and not quite real" (Mickleson 640).

² The comment appeared originally in an interview with Travers by Nora E. Taylor for the *Christian Science Monitor* (November 16, 1965).

³ It is surprising that Nodelman does not address the quality of Shepard's drawings in this discussion of milestone children's *picture* books, but focuses instead on what he perceives to be Travers's weaknesses as a writer. Moreover, alterations of the illustrations in some translations might justifiably disqualify the book. Editors Edith Zena Sutherland and May Hill Arbuthnot, however, list *Mary Poppins* as the 1934 selection for twentieth century milestones in the 7th edition of *Children and Books*, 78.

⁴ Elsewhere I quote directly from Donovan's essay, but Demers's summarized version serves better on this point of the discussion.

⁵ Donovan quotes from Elizabeth Ammons's "Going in Circles: The Female Geography of Sarah Orne Jewett's *Country of the Pointed Firs*," 85.

⁶ Donovan refers to Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 19.

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