

“Angels in the House”: Female Images in Victorian Children’s Fantasy

REN Aihong^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Languages, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.

*Corresponding author.

Supported by Shandong Normal University Young Teachers’ Research Project (Social Sciences:13SQR015); Shandong Provincial Cultural Department Research Project (2014013).

Received 15 December 2014; accepted 6 February 2015
Published online 26 March 2015

Abstract

Victorian period witnessed prosperity and popularity of children’s fantasy. Female characters abound in the adult fiction of Victorian literature. But what are they like in works written for children? This thesis attempts to analyze different women images in children’s fantasy. Some writers choose to omit women; some idealize women as angels in the house; some portray them as powerful and aggressive. These different images of women reflect the social values of the time.

Key words: Victorian children’s fantasy; Angel of the house; Woman as absent; Woman as ideal; Woman as powerful

Ren, A. H. (2015). “Angels in the House”: Female Images in Victorian Children’s Fantasy. *Canadian Social Science*, 11(3), 266-272. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/6663> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6663>

INTRODUCTION

Female characters abound in the adult fiction of Victorian literature, partly due to the fact that Victorian literature of the nineteenth century saw the rise and power of a group of women writers, such as the Bronte sisters, George Eliot and Mrs. Gaskell. Women writers surely show a special concern for the fate of woman, and the women characters they portray indeed are memorable. Jane Eyre,

Catherine Earnshaw, Maggie Tulliver and Mary Barton all move readers young and old for their struggle for life and love. Women writers show a profound sympathy for their portrayal of the struggle of the female characters, for example, Jane Eyre and Maggie Tulliver remind the readers a lot about the personal life and experience of their creators. However, under the pen of the male writers, it might be a different picture. Edith Lazaros Honig asserts that “Victorian women in adult fiction were submissive and repressed or, if independent and assertive, mad and bad.” (Honig, 1988, p.3) Victorian period also witnessed a prosperity and popularity of children’s literature, especially the fantasy for children, which earned the period the title of the Golden Age of children’s literature. Writers of Victorian children’s fantasy include Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll, George Macdonald, Kenneth Grahame, John Ruskin, Edith Nesbit, to name just a few. Women are termed as “lilies in the gardens” fondly by John Ruskin. What are women like in the children’s fantasy? Are they as submissive and repressed, or mad and bad as presented in the adult fiction? This thesis attempts to analyze different women images in children’s fantasy. A close reading reveals different patterns of women characters by those fantasy writers.

1. WOMAN AS ABSENT

Although women play an important role in social life, it is an undeniable fact that they are often overlooked in literature. Adventure novels for adults and children have ignored the existence of women, from Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* in the 18th century, to R. M. Ballantyne’s *Coral Island* (1858) and Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* (1883) of the 19th century, to William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) of the 20th century. Women are just absent. They either remain in the background playing a supporting role for the male protagonist or simply do

not exist. In Victorian era when women were regarded as angels in the house, the exclusion of women in the male adventure world seems to have more excuse. Victorian England had a strict borderline between the two genders. A woman's place is at home. As an angel, she should be kept untainted by the public life, the world of affairs which belong to man. It is her duty to create a world of peace where man can take refuge from the harsh outside world and the children can be well taken care of.

The absence of women in adventure novels not only shows the low social status of women, but also reflects the social and cultural values of a patriarchal society: A woman belongs to the family, and she has nothing to do with the external world entirely dominated by male. Women are also hard to find a place in some Victorian children's fantasy novels. And if they exist, their image is broken and incomplete, and their role is very minor. Kenneth Grahame in *Wind in the Willows* (1908) only allows for three underprivileged, negligible female roles, while John Ruskin chooses to omit women completely from his fairy tale *The King of the Golden River* (1851). They give readers a feeling that the world is composed entirely of men.

Wind in the Willows centers on four animal characters—the Mole, the Badger, the Water Rat, the Toad and their idyllic and pastoral life around the Wild Wood. These animals get together to enjoy a variety of colorful activities like boating, chatting, sightseeing, etc.. However, their tranquil world is a purely male one where no females find a place. Humphrey Carpenter calls the beautiful world formed by the four bachelor animals “bachelor Arcadia” (Carpenter, 1985, p.156). The reason why Kenneth Grahame chose to omit women has intrigued many critics. Honig claims that Grahame always had bad feelings toward women; therefore his vision of an idyllic society is one that excludes women (Honig, 1988, p.23). Geraldine D. Poss (1975) in her essay “An Epic in Arcadia: The Pastoral World of The Wind in the Willows” explains that Grahame omits “all aspects of the heroic life that might cause strife and pain and eventually death.” (p.83) In Homer's epic, women are the root causes of strife and trouble among males: The beautiful Helen of Sparta brought about the Trojan War, a devastating disaster; Agamemnon and Achilles competed for female prisoners, which resulted in their discord. Grahame makes sure that his animal heroes will not be troubled by woman, because she simply does not exist. Their Arcadia will never be “destroyed by the passion or treachery of love.” (Poss, 1975, p.85)

Still, it is not fair to say that Grahame completely excludes female figures from his novel. There are female figures, only that they do not figure much in the novel. Altogether three women appear in the latter part of the novel, all of whom are involved in the adventures of Toad: the jailer's daughter, a washerwoman, and a barge-woman. All the three share several things in common: Their status is inferior; they have no name, which is

indicative of their unknown state; they are all judged by the male protagonist—Toad. The Washerwoman is negligible for she just appears once as a prop in a play to let out her clothes to Toad without speaking any word. The jailer's daughter and the barge-woman seem to play contrary roles: One to facilitate Toad in his adventure, the other to serve as his obstacle. The Jailer's daughter is a happy, intelligent and good-hearted girl. She pities Toad's misery, provides him with delicious food, and repeatedly acts as an attentive listener to the arrogant Toad. Her typical feminine behaviors satisfy not only Toad's appetite but also his vanity, which prepares him to come out of the blank desperation of his situation and regain confidence in himself. She also arranges an escape plan for Toad, making him disguise as the official washerwoman to leave the prison. Proud Toad is reluctant to be so humiliated as a washerwoman, but he finally follows her proposal and pays some gold coins in exchange for the clothes of the washerwoman, who happens to her aunt. On the surface, the girl helps Toad out of goodwill, but it is undeniable that her actions are more based on a greed for Toad's gold. Ever since the jailer knows that Toad's pockets are well lined, he frequently reminds Toad to buy comforts and luxuries at a price. However, Toad ignores his proposal, which makes the jailer very displeased with his airs and meanness. The jailer's daughter, on the other hand, is more wily and clever: First, she brings fragrant bubble-and-squeak to awaken Toad's hope for a better life; then she brings a hot cup of tea and hot buttered toast to win Toad's trust. She has an intimate understanding of how to please arrogant Toad and act as his patient audience. She fetches Toad more tea and toast, making him talk about his hall, his life, his friends and their activities together, and pretending a strong interest in what he has to tell. As a result, when she says goodnight, Toad has been restored very much to “the same sanguine, self-satisfied animal that he had been of old” (Grahame, 1993, p.112). After many interesting talks together, when the jailer's daughter thinks the right time has come, she puts forward her premeditated escape plan. Toad wins freedom with his gold coins. When he is ready to buy a ticket in the railway station, he suddenly realizes to his horror that he has left both coat and waistcoat behind him in his cell, and with them “his pocket-book, money, keys, watch, matches, pencil-case—all that makes life worth living” (Ibid., p.117). The jailer's daughter is too smart to neglect the importance of sufficient money to facilitate a smooth escape for Toad, but the fact that she allows for Toad's wallet and valuables to be left in the cell can not fail to make the readers wonder whether she has done it deliberately or not. Her motives for helping Toad then become highly questionable.

After his successful flight from the police, Toad who dresses himself as a washerwoman comes across a big stout woman in a barge. After a simple conversation, the barge-woman agrees to give Toad a lift. Toad is only too

happy for his good luck to suspect any foul play. He never imagines that he has fallen into a trap: The barge-woman will force him to wash a heap of dirty clothes. Fairly cornered and finding no way to escape, Toad sullenly resigns himself to the fate until his back aches badly and his paws begin to get crinkly. His complaining and muttering bring about a burst of unrestrained laughter of the barge-woman who has been secretly observing him. Unable to further hold his pent-up anger, Toad loses control and reveals his true identity, exclaiming: “I would have you to know that I am a Toad, a very well-known, respected, distinguished Toad! I may be under a bit of a cloud at present, but I will NOT be laughed at by a barge woman!” (Grahame, 1993, p.148) Calling him a “horrid, nasty, crawly Toad” (p.148), the woman catches his leg and throws him into the river with violence. Toad finds her still laughing when he rises to the surface. Later on, when Toad tells his adventures to his friend the Rat, the Rat reproaches him: “...don’t you see what an awful ass you’ve been making of yourself? On your own admission you have been handcuffed, imprisoned, starved, chased, terrified out of your life, insulted, jeered at, and ignominiously flung into the water—by a woman, too!” (Grahame, 1993, p.162) Toad feels himself unlucky enough to be thrown into the river by a bad fat woman; but in the Rat’s long list of the misfortunes Toad has encountered, it is quite apparent that the last is the worst—being thrown into the river by a woman is the greatest humiliation. The fact that Rat puts this at the very end of the long list highlights the seriousness of the matter. If it is acceptable to be bullied by another man, then Toad being deceived, ridiculed and insulted by a woman—who has always been termed as weaker and inferior as the second sex—is most undignified and shameful.

Toad is made to suffer at the hands of both the scheming jailer’s daughter and the black-hearted barge-woman. Though arrogant and bold Toad himself is to blame for his frustrations, he is still a good guy in the eyes of the other animals. If his faults lie with his restlessness, he is still approved of by the narrator, who compares the adventurous Toad to Ulysses, naming the title of the last chapter “The Return of Ulysses”. Toad’s longing for adventure away from home is shared by all humanity, which is also the dream of every child. In this sense, his failings are also what make him a lovable hero. Toad serves very much as a positive character. On the contrary, the portrayal of the jailer’s daughter and the barge-woman reflects Grahame’s negative attitude towards woman. The jailer’s daughter appears to be caring and kind, but indeed she has an eye for Toad’s money. The barge-woman also takes advantage of Toad and lures him to the board on her barge, but when she finds him useless, she just throws him into the river. These two women characters remind the readers of Grahame’s wife Elspeth Thomason.

Two years younger than Grahame, Elspeth Thomason was “a kind of ferociously flirtatious bluestocking”

(Carpenter, 1985, p.151). The precocious girl had the habit of pursuing successful writers such as Tennyson even as a young child. When Grahame was acquainted with her, he had already published *The Golden Age* (1895) and won some fame as a writer for children, which made him a fascinating prey for Elspeth. The biographical accounts about Grahame give the readers a feeling that she was a rather cunning woman and Grahame was hooked and tricked into marrying her in 1899. She took advantage of his illness to visit him without chaperons and made it impossible for Grahame to withdraw from marriage. It seemed that Grahame himself was not happy at the prospect of this marriage. On hearing news of their impending wedding, Grahame’s sister Helen, who detested Elspeth, was rather astonished and she asked Grahame whether the marriage was going ahead. Grahame answered in a tone of the deepest gloom: “I suppose so; I suppose so” (Carpenter, 1985, p.152). Their marriage was a disaster from the beginning. Passions fade away and Kenneth began to avoid physical contact with Elspeth after she conceived a child, who poured out her resentment at his indifference and coldness and turned all her hopes and affections later on to their only child Alastair. Grahame, on the other hand, spent as much time as possible to be away from his family and with his male friends who could understand him, console him and share his tastes. Grahame did not create many women in his novels, but apparently he was not enthusiastic about them. His prejudice against and disgust for women can in some sense be attributed to his disastrous marriage and overbearing wife.

In *Wind in the Willows*, the four animal friends live in a male utopia, where they enjoy happy bachelor time together without worries about marriage or children, free from family responsibilities. Their life is rather colorful, with activities like boating, walking, picnicking, etc.. Their community is a close-knit one, with people helping each other and caring for each other. When Rat meets Mole for the first time, he invites him to boat together, sharing his food, teaching him a lot, and inviting him to his house to talk, all of which move Rat to happy tears. They deeply respect the fatherly figure the Badger, and sincerely help the hot-headed and conceited Toad. They can both manly and bravely fight away the weasels that capture Toad’s Hall, and proficient in womanly work like cleaning the room and preparing delicious food. Indeed, this male utopia, or “bachelor Arcadia” is a self-sufficient community, and therefore there is no reason for women to exist.

Victorian England witnessed the emergence of a large number of talented women writers, including the Bronte sisters, Mrs. Gaskell, George Eliot, Charlotte Young, etc.. This unprecedented phenomenon of female genius shocked the whole world. They created a lot of memorable female characters, and show great concern for the plight and fate of women, their pursuit of freedom and

independence. Against this backdrop of woman power in literature, the absence of women images in *The Wind in the Willows* is particularly interesting. However, this work is far from being unique in this aspect. The famous art critic John Ruskin goes even further as to totally exclude women in his only fascinating fairy tale *The King of the Golden River*. If there are still two or three minor female characters flashing once in a while in *The Wind in the Willows*, there is no mention of women at all in *The King of the Golden River*, as if they simply do not exist in reality. Honig (1988) claims Ruskin's fairy tale is "the only outstanding fantasy of the nineteenth century to lack a female character" (p.24) and attributes it to Ruskin's sexual confusion. Ravenna Helson (1974) attributes the lack of female characters to Ruskin's "dominant, overpossessive mother and to his youthful need for relationship to the masculine archetype of the king" (p.70). Ruskin composed this fairy tale in 1841 at the request of a 12-year-old little girl named Euphemia Chalmers Gray, who later became his wife. However, their marriage was annulled six years later, for Ruskin failed to consummate it. This tale was not published until 1851.

Ruskin modeled on Brothers Grimm folktales which exerted their powerful influence on him when he was a little boy. This tale resembles several Grimm tales, such as *The King of the Golden Mountain* and *Water of Life*, yet the hero of this tale, the youngest brother Gluck, apparently differs from the similarly weak and powerless heroes in Grimm tales for he not only is parentless, but wins no princess in the end to signify his marital maturation. U. C. Knoepfelmacher (1998) also notes with interest the lack of female characters in this tale and he attributes the lack of female characters to Ruskin's attempt to purify the story of "aggression and sensuality he found in his originals" (p.55). He finds the hero Gluck is androgynous and non-masculine, and he has a strong respect for the ways of a feminine nature. This fairy tale is about the triumph of love, kindness, and goodness of Gluck over his two evil brothers. Gluck is distinguished from his two aggressive brothers in every way, not only in appearance, but also in character. The two elder brothers are very ugly men, with over-hanging eyebrows and small, half shut, dull eyes, while Gluck is a fair boy of twelve years old with blue eyes. The two brothers are mean, greedy, and cruel, killing every creature that does not pay for its eating. They shoot the blackbirds, kill the hedgehogs, poison the crickets and smother the cicadas. They work their servants without paying them any wages, and hoard their corn to sell for twice its value. They are very wealthy, with heaps of gold lying about on their floors, yet they have never given a penny to others in need. They pay no regard when poor people starve at their door. They are not only harsh to the other people, but very cruel to their own little brother. They make Gluck eat the leftovers and beat him often as a way of education. Gluck serves as a domestic for his older brothers. Gluck

is assigned a feminine role by his brothers. He is just like a boy-Cinderella, being treated in the same way as Cinderella suffering at the hands of her elder sisters. When his brothers are out doing business, Gluck stays at home and doing the domestic work such as cooking, cleaning, sweeping, roasting, washing dishes, etc., which has been traditionally a woman's job. While two black brothers are cold-hearted, cruel and mean, Gluck is marked by his tender heart. When his two brothers mistreat Southwest Wind Esquire, the personified wind, Gluck lets him in to warm himself and offers him his own share of mutton. The selfish, evil brothers satisfy their own thirst by denying needy creatures and they are reduced to two black stones at the end of the quest. By contrast, Gluck is selfless and generous, allowing an old man, a fair child and a puppy to drink the holy water in spite of his own thirst. As a result, he is rewarded by the King of the Golden River to be the only one who succeeds in the quest and becomes a wealthy man. By his self-sacrifice, love and kindness, Gluck restores the Edenic Treasure Valley to its original purity and fertility.

Gluck is opposed to his brothers also in his striking innocence. While his brothers are portrayed as very aggressive, killing creatures in their field, beating their youngest brother, quarrelling with their servants, dueling each other to be the first to take the challenge, stealing holy water from the church, denying needy individuals in their quest, Gluck remains very submissive and docile with a tender and kind heart. Moreover, he is portrayed as very powerless, showing no masculinity connected with male adulthood. Knoepfelmacher (1998) recognizes that Ruskin had a tendency to "identify masculinity with an aggressiveness he both courted and feared." (p.68) Feminized Gluck is free from the male aggressiveness, and with no princess to suggest sexuality, young Gluck remains as innocent and pure as ever. With no male aggression and female sexuality, Gluck returns safely to a happy and asexual world of innocent childhood, which also is a most desirable state for young Ruskin.

2. WOMAN AS IDEAL

"The angel" is the most dominant image among the four main stereotypes of women in Victorian England "the angel, the demon, the old maid, and the fallen woman" (Auerbach, 1982, p.63). Coventry Patmore's immensely popular poem entitled *The Angel in the House* (1854) helped promote and popularize woman's image as an angel—a passive, meek, charming, graceful, gentle, self-sacrificing, pious, and pure creature devoted and submissive to her husband. She is man's subordinate, entirely dependent on man. Her main role is to "provide a place of renewal for men, after their rigorous activities in the harsh, competitive public sphere" (Gorham, 1982, p.4). She is a good wife and a proper mother, "a perfect lady, an angel in the house, contentedly submissive to

men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen in her own realm of the House” (Showalter, 1977, p.14). Among the roles of a woman, being a mother no doubt is the most important. Mothers are very often absent or distant in children’s fantasy and fairy tale, as is shown in many works by many authors such as John Ruskin, Kenneth Grahame, Charles Kingsley and Lewis Carroll. The reasons are various, but the most apparent one is that only in the absence of a perfect watchful mother can it be possible for the children to be on their own to explore the world and find themselves. Only in this way, can the child find a way to be independent, develop himself and finally become mature. Although children remain the focus of Children’s fantasy, there are still some portrayals of ideal mothers, as reflected in George Macdonald’s fantasies: *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871), *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872) and its sequel *The Princess and Curdie* (1883).

In *At the Back of the North Wind*, the young hero Diamond’s mother is a devoted mother. The family is very poor, but Diamond’s mother is never complaining or neglecting her duty as a wife and mother. She is very kind and loyal, having a strong faith in her husband. When their master Mr. Coleman goes bankrupt, their family suffers a lot. Diamond’s father loses his job as a groom, but his wife still has a strong faith in him, regarding her husband as the best man in the world. She is quiet and soothing when her husband is down and depressed. She is also a devoted mother and sharply differs from the other poor women like their neighbors who abandon themselves in drinking to forget their troubles. When Diamond is sick, his mother gets up several times to check on him during the night. She is even brave enough to take him down from the horse he has climbed onto in his sleepwalk in spite of her fear of horses. Indeed, she is willing to sacrifice her life for the sake of her children. She forms a strong bond with her son, and Diamond shoulders the responsibility as a bread-winner to please her and returns from the back of the north wind because he can not bear the thought of making his mother sorrowful by leaving her. Diamond’s mother is also considerate to the welfare of others, taking the orphaned girl Nanny home to take care of her in spite of her husband’s objections.

Mrs. Peterson is another idealized mother in both *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) and *The Princess and the Goblin* (1872). She is the young miner Curdie’s mother. Like Diamond’s mother, she is also a hard-working, devoted wife and mother of the low-class. She is clever hands, in making their house like a heaven for her husband and son, but not clever in her words. As a matter of fact, she does not talk much. However, she can be trusted with secrets, and Curdie is ever open to his mother about whatever is on his mind. More importantly, Mrs. Peterson is a childlike lady who has the heart to believe in magic that is denied by rational men including Curdie. After Curdie is rescued by the Princess Irene, he refuses

to believe in what she says about her old grandmother and her magic thread, taking it to be her false fancy. When he is brought to the old princess’s attic room, he can see nothing but an empty room and feels much hurt by the princess making a game of him. When he confides in his mother his frustrated thoughts, Mrs. Peterson consoles him and tells him her own magic personal experience. She tries to make her son believe that there are things in the world that defy rational explanation, since “some people can see things other people can’t see” (Macdonald, 1967, p.149). A believing mind is what makes Mrs. Peterson distinguished from other adults. In this way, she remains as innocent and pure as a child, which elevates her to an ideal woman and mother. And for her peculiar innocence, she wins the trust of the old Princess, who entrusts the young Princess Irene to her care when danger arises. By her selfless devotion, she also wins love from her only child. Curdie is willing to work overnight in the mine by himself just to buy a warm red petticoat for his dear mother. Curdie loves her so much that when the king wishes him to enter his bodyguard, he declines the offer and the prospect of a promising future, for he thinks he “can’t get on very well” (Macdonald, 1967, p.190) with his mother. She listens with great delight when the Princess narrates Curdie’s heroic deeds to the king, for her son’s deeds are pleasant to her ears and makes her very proud. As Diamond’s mother kindly treats the orphaned girl Nanny as her own daughter, Mrs. Peterson also acts as the kind surrogate mother for Princess Irene, who praises her in front of the king to be “such a nice mother, and has been so kind to me” (Ibid., p.184).

The idealized mothers seem rather boring and dull, for they are too good to be true. Behind this perfect image of a woman like an angel is man’s desire to dominate and control the other. As Diamond’s mother and Curdie’s mother are all created by George Macdonald, it is worth asking why he has portrayed mothers as tender and loving as angels. In fact, Macdonald not only portrays good mothers, but tender grandmothers also haunt his stories. The fact that he lost his own mother at the age of eight might account for this strong yearning for motherly love in his works. The loss of his mother at an early age affected him so deeply that he might try to recapture his memory of her in these portraits of mother figures, holding an image which lingers in memory and exists only in imagination.

3. WOMAN AS POWERFUL

Writers of Victorian children’s fantasy also portray many powerful women figures who are in sharp contrast to the idealized, obedient, angel-like women. By means of the fantastic mode, the fantasy writers are not so constrained by social reality and they enjoy great freedom to project their own conceptions of what females should be like. As Knoepflmacher (1983) points out, fantasy allows

writers to “portray little girls who were allowed to express hostility without the curbs on female rebelliousness that had been placed earlier in children’s literature” (p.14). Honig also asserts that the image of the True Woman — the submissive and domesticated female — is scarcely to be found in the children’s fantasy, and instead she finds a subversive element in the fantasy, “a quiet rebellion” (Honig, 1988, p.8). Some even display a rebelliousness and aggressiveness which can be rarely found in the adult literature. This is especially true of those writers who identify and sympathize with women. Take Lewis Carroll as an example. Surrounded by seven sisters since childhood, Carroll is likely to develop a female consciousness. When we take into consideration the fact that women played very important roles in his life, it is not difficult to understand why he identified with feminine sensibility and showed a special concern for children, especially little girls. The seven-year-old little girl Alice and the female characters in the two most popular fantasy novels by Carroll exhibit great power. The gender roles are reversed, and gender differences become blurred. While female characters enjoy great power, independence and freedom, the traditionally powerful men become weak and incompetent. The red king in wonderland is childish and useless; the kings in the looking-glass world are equally impotent. By contrast, women are given more ability to act, to decide and to transcend their traditional roles.

In both *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice is a little girl with great physical power. She does not show features of an ideal Victorian girl like “modesty and obedience” (Honig, 1998, p.84). She is curious and adventurous, and sometimes even aggressive like a male hero, the very opposite of the ideal girl. In her first adventure, Alice follows a talking White Rabbit, down a well, through a pool of tears, and into a garden where she encounters a Mad Hatter’s tea party, a game of croquet played with living things, and a trial of the Knave of Hearts. Alice encounters many adults ranging from the neurotic White Rabbit, the self-important Caterpillar, to the officious Duchess and crazy Queen of Hearts. These absurd creatures all attempt to order Alice about, but Alice manages to insist on her independence and refuses to be dominated by them. Throughout the adventure, she is puzzled about her identity, frustrated and helpless, and yet she manages to remain in control of her body and situation and finally returns back to the reality in triumph. She proves herself to be a little girl of great courage, wit, assertion and strong-will. The fact that Alice leaves the comfort zone to begin her journey is in itself beyond gender norms. In the underground and looking-glass world, Alice is always on her own to explore. She is adventurous, and surely she lacks one important quality shared by heroines in Victorian children’s novels—cautiousness. In the first place, the whole adventures begin with her willful and reckless behavior. When she

is sitting at the bank with her sister, the sight of a talking white rabbit running by catches her attention, and she immediately follows it, “never once considering how in the world she was to get out again” (Carroll, 1993, P.18). After she opens the little door behind a low curtain and sees a most lovely garden, she desires to “wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains” (Carroll, 1993, p.18), forgetting the existence of the peculiar rabbit and the original purpose of her journey.

Alice goes through a series of bodily changes in Wonderland by drinking or eating things, ignoring the potential danger and against the instructions of the books she has read. When the Caterpillar asks her what size she wants, Alice asserts that she is not particular to size, as long as it does not change very often. However, she shows a strong tendency to be larger, for a large body symbolizes more power. After she drinks a potion in White Rabbit’s house, she gets very huge. Stuck in the little house and unable to move, she has to lie down to make herself comfortable. In spite of the inconvenience, she enjoys being tall and big, for it gives her power to fight. When the Rabbit comes near the window, Alice stretches her hand out of the window to prevent it from entering. When the Rabbit sends his servant Bill to go down the chimney, Alice kicks him up the chimney like a sky-rocket. When the Rabbit suggests burning down the house, Alice poses a threat: “If you do, I’ll set Dinah at you.” (Carroll, 1993, p.45) When they attack her with little pebbles, Alice shouts at them loudly to make them stop. Here Alice becomes the powerful one to resolve conflicts with the others. Her physical growth “is apparently symbolic of her personality growth, her growth in confidence, assertiveness, and courage” (Honig, 1998, p.84). With the help of the mushroom, the empowered Alice can boldly challenge the adult values. In her encounter with the Caterpillar, she takes leave after finding the creature unpleasant; in the Duchess’s kitchen, she tries to stop the Duchess from abusing the baby and then nurses it after it is abandoned; in the mad-tea party, she sits at the tea table in spite of the claim of “No room” (Carroll, 1993, p.70) and protests angrily when the creatures make rude remarks; in the Queen’s garden, Alice refuses to answer the Queen’s demands and protects the gardeners from being beheaded; in the croquet ground, even the domineering Queen herself asks Alice for her advice about beheading the Cheshire Cat who has no body but a head; in the trial scene, Alice takes away the pencil from a juryman for the squeaking noise and upsets the whole jury by tipping over the jury-box. With the growth of her body, Alice is getting more confident and takes a more masterful control of her situations. She interrupts the King, defies the Queen, and rises to the protection of the accused Knave. She declares angrily to the Queen that they are nothing but a pack of cards, and when the cards come flying at her, Alice “gave a little scream, half of

fright, half of anger, and tried to beat them off” (Carroll, 1993, p.121).

Not only Alice shows her power, the other adult women characters also subvert the traditional women images. The Duchess is a brutal and bad-tempered mother figure, violently shaking the baby and then tossing him up and down to make it stop crying. Her resentment to her role as a mother makes her eager to abandon the baby and satisfy her own needs to attend the Queen’s croquet game. Motherhood is burdensome, and she becomes a different person when free from her duty. Alice is quite surprised to see a rather pleasant Duchess in the croquet ground. The Queen of Hearts is mad and furious. She demands absolute authority, and constantly issues a verbal threat of execution to anyone who displeases her. Her mere presence is greatly feared by her subjects. In the garden, she violently orders soldiers to execute the three gardeners; in the Croquet-ground, she never stops quarrelling with the players. Under her tyranny, the King becomes infantile and weak. His masculinity and dominance are gone. Wherever anything arises, he turns to his wife for help. When he is angry with the Cheshire Cat and does not know what to do with it, he calls the Queen for help. The Queen of Hearts is a more complete subversion of the angel in the house. As a ruler, she frightens her subjects with her tyranny; as a wife, she is superior to her husband, making him bow to her power; as a mother, she charges her own child Jack of Heart with theft, trying to kill him.

Compared with the strong female characters, the male characters are quite impotent. The king should have the highest authority in the kingdom, but he humbly and timidly asks the queen for every trifling matter. In the looking-glass world, the kings are no better. The cowardly White King does not go to rescue his queen who is running fast as some enemy are after her. Instead, he only makes a memorandum about her. When the Lion and the Unicorn fight for his crown, he is trembling with fear, almost shaking his head off. The only thing he does is to wait passively for the messenger. The two queens, by contrast, are highly mobile. The Red Queen takes Alice to run; the White Queen runs as quickly. She also acts as a guide for Alice to be a queen, and she also has the ability to transform and protect herself when danger arises.

CONCLUSION

The different treatment of women characters reflects the attitude towards women in Victorian society. When women were still considered as the other, they were dispensable. When they catered to men’s desires, they were idolized and idealized as “lilies in the queen’s garden” and “angels in the house”. However, what women really wanted is to be independent and to enjoy as much freedom and equality as men. When they were unhappy with their situations and repressed state, they surely would be aggressive and rebellious. The Victorian fantasy writers did a lot to invest women with power. Those water fairies in Charles Kingsley’s *The Waterbabies*, George Macdonald’s magical and powerful grandmothers, and those little girls created by many female fantasy writers all deserve a close study.

REFERENCES

- Auerbach, N. (1982). *Woman and the demon: The life of a Victorian myth*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Carroll, L. (1993). *Alice in wonderland*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Carpenter, H. (1985). *Secret gardens: A study of the golden age of children’s literature*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Gorham, D. (1982). *The Victorian girl and the feminine ideal*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Grahame, K. (1993). *The wind in the willows*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth editions limited.
- Helson, R. (1974). The psychological origins of fantasy for children in mid-Victorian England. *Children’s Literature*, 3, 66-75.
- Honig, E. (1998). *Breaking the angelic image: Woman power in Victorian children’s fantasy*. London: Greenwood Press.
- Knoepflmacher, U. C. (1983). Little girls without their curls: Female aggression in Victorian children’s literature. *Children’s Literature*, 2, 14-31.
- Knoepflmacher, U. C. (1998). *Ventures into childland: Victorians, fairy tales, and femininity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Macdonald, G. (1967). *The princess and the goblin*. New York, NY: Airmont Publishing company, Inc.
- Poss, G. D. (1975). An epic in Arcadia: The pastoral world of *the wind in the willows*. *Children’s Literature*, 4, 80-90.
- Showalter, E. (1977). *A literature of their own*. Princeton: Princeton UP.