The Socialite, The Simpleton and The Shopkeeper

Female roles in the works of Beatrix Potter

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Abstract (not to exceed 200 words - any continuation sheets must contain the author's full name and full title of the thesis):

Using a close reading of the texts, I explore female roles in Beatrix Potter's collected tales, focusing specifically on the role of female friendship, the role of mothering and finally the labour roles. I draw upon examples from *The Complete Collection of Original Tales 1-23* as well as the recently published *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots.* Key discussions circulate around Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Cousin Ribby, as well Jemima Puddle-Duck. Throughout all three chapters, I discuss the theme of performance in Potter's works and the varying degrees to which her characters are simply performing a role in order to conform to the Victorian ideal of femininity. I argue that Potter creates her female characters in a way which suggests that formation of female friendships and mothering actions are simply performative and mocks a society which imposes such ideals of women. On the other hand, I argue that Potter does the opposite with role of labour and in doing so, reflects a society which was seeing an increase in female entrepreneurship and business ownership. Finally, I argue that the continued popularity of Potter's tales can be attributed to the idea that many of the issues explored around female roles remain relevant today.

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Introduction

'What a funny sight it is to see a brood of ducklings with a hen! Listen to the story of Jemima Puddle-duck who was annoyed because the farmer's wife would not let her hatch her own eggs'[1] writes Beatrix Potter in her opening lines of *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*. This unusual sentence is crucial when examining the ways in which Beatrix Potter handles her female characters. As an author of the fin de siècle, Potter's life straddles the Victorian and Edwardian period. Born in 1866, she did not publish her famous first book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* until the very end of the Victorian era in 1901 and her subsequent books were published within the Edwardian era. However, it is Potter's Victorian childhood and sensibility which are the foundation of her tales as she creates characters who both mock and suffer at the hands of a society which imposes strict constraints upon women. Catherine Barker in 'Female Friendships in Nineteenth Century Literature' writes, the 'two great pinnacles of achievement' for a nineteenth century woman were 'marriage and motherhood'.[2] Potter challenges the ideal of femininity characterised by the importance of such achievements in her portrayal of womanhood and instead offers a new model of femininity which allows flaws, failure and the opportunity for multi-faceted individuals. Not only this, where the two pinnacles marriage and motherhood are not achieved successfully, she gives her characters the space to thrive in typically less feminine areas such as business and entrepreneurship.

In 2016 the world marked 150 years since the birth of Beatrix Potter, one of Britain's best-known children's authors, whose collection of short stories about the adventures of woodland creatures were famously published in small white books alongside her watercolour illustrations. The anniversary was celebrated with numerous exhibitions of her artwork: The Royal Mint released a series of 50p coins inspired by her characters and the legacy of her charming writing, and mischievous characters leapt back into popularity with new screenplays written for the stage and screen. Crucially, the announcement of a new book, the previously unpublished *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots,* captured the

[1] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 7.
[2] Catherine Barker, 'Female Friendships in Nineteenth Century Literature', (Loughborough University, 1988) p. 46.

anticipation and enthusiasm of Potter fans worldwide. It topped the book charts within 24 hours, becoming a bestseller months ahead of its publication in November 2016.[3] The popularity of Potter's writing has clearly not faltered as the franchise she built around her tales continues to play a part in popular culture today. Potter's work seems timeless, not only because the typical trope of anthropomorphism she employs continues to play a critical role in children's literature, but because she uses this to comment on social and cultural issues that still have relevance today.

Using a close reading of the texts, I explore female roles in Potter's collected tales, focusing specifically on the role of female friendship, the role of mothering and finally the labour roles undertaken by her female characters. I draw upon examples from *The Complete Collection of Original Tales 1-23* as well as the recently published *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots.* Though I discuss several female characters, key discussions circulate around Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Cousin Ribby, as well Jemima Puddle-Duck. Throughout all three chapters, I discuss the theme of performance in Potter's works and the varying degrees to which her characters are simply performing a role in order to conform to the Victorian ideal of femininity. I argue that Potter creates her female characters in a way which suggests that formation of female friendships and mothering actions are simply performative and mocks a society which imposes such ideals of women. Contrary to this, I argue that Potter does quite the opposite with the role of labour and in doing so, reflects a society which was seeing an increase in female entrepreneurship and business ownership.

Given the sustained popularity of her writing, it appears that surprisingly little critical analysis of her work exists. Much of the work around Potter is biographical; Linda Lear and Leslie Linder have written extensively on Potter's life and her illustrations. Linder broke the secret code Potter used in her journals spanning sixteen years. The journals were translated and published in 1966.[4] Very little has been written with regards to the representation of gender and in particular the female gender in Potter's tales. I found just one article referencing gender specifically, by Heather A. Evans. However, this looks almost exclusively at *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* and so therefore does not offer an

[3]Alison Flood, 'Lost Beatrix Potter story becomes bestseller months before publication', *The Guardian,* (2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/dec/07/booksforchildrenandteenagers> [accessed 11August 2018].
[4] Beatrix Potter, *The Journal of Beatrix Potter from 1881*-1897 (London: Frederick Warne, 1966)

analysis of the representation of gender throughout her oeuvre[5]. In my discussion around Potter's writing I will draw upon critics who have written more broadly on topics such as animal studies, gender studies, children's literature and anthropomorphism, Victorian culture and studies into the role of labour for women. A combination of these elements will strengthen my argument that Potter uses her female animal characters to critique the constraints of the Victorian era on the female gender.

The nineteenth century was a turning point in the way we view animals within human society. The publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was revolutionary and was a catalyst for change within Victorian society and culture. As Claire Charlotte McKechnie and John Miller write in their introduction to *Victorian Animals*:

> The nineteenth century witnessed a crucial shift in understandings of the human–animal boundary that was also accelerated by many of the century's key historical developments. The extension and consolidation of empire, industrialization, the emergence of animal welfare organizations, the anti-vivisection movement, and the rise of veterinary medicine all involved significant changes in human interactions with, and perceptions of, animals.[6]

This certainly seems to be the backdrop for Potter as she plays with the animal-human boundary through the anthropomorphism which anchors her writing. The impact of this 'crucial shift' cannot be overestimated when looking at the Potter's tales. She was fascinated by the animals which inhabited her world, with many of her characters being based on pets she kept herself. With this in mind, it would be foolish to disregard the choices Potter makes around which animals play the differing female roles she explores. Whilst Potter is most famous for her depictions of rabbits, what is more interesting is her choice to use cats as many of her female characters, most notably Mrs Tabitha Twitchit, presumed a widow, and Ribby, presumed a spinster. In *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Culture*, Monica Flegel writes, 'linked together in life and in fiction, cats and single women are over-determined as supplements to the home, necessary to its functioning but also at times, dangerously

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[5] Heather A. Evans, 'Kittens and Kitchens: Food, Gender and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*', *Victorian Literature and Culture,* 36 (2008), 603–623

[6] Claire Charlotte McKechnie and John Miller, 'Victorian Animals: Introduction', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17, 4, (2012), 436–441

independent of it or […]always at risk from being excluded from it.'[7] Her discussion around single women and the 'cat-lady spinster'[8] is particularly interesting when looked at in relation to the anthropomorphism Potter employs. Instead of a human character with cats as pets to characterise her spinsterhood, Potter can simply use a cat to demonstrate this, blurring the animal-human boundary.

In a similar vein to this, when Potter offers depictions of unconventional approaches to motherhood she chooses to showcase a model displayed by ducks in their natural habitat. In *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, Potter presents us with a character who is desperate to be a mother, and a character who chooses to opt-out of motherhood completely. The casting of ducks to represent this role is interesting as recent research into their reproductive habits shows us that their mating rituals can be aggressive, involve 'forced copulation' and sometimes result in the death of the female. Whilst this is not something that is addressed directly in Potter's tale, there is certainly an air of danger running through the narrative and in particular with the relationship between Jemima and the fox. Rebeccah Puddle-duck's decision to opt out of motherhood could be seen as an attempt to regain control over her body despite living in society which sees motherhood as something to strive for. Again, instead of presenting this to us with human characters, Potter can use the anthropomorphic nature of her writing to present this ideal to us through an animal.

Anthropomorphism has and still does play an important part in children's literature, using animals as a prism through which to teach children about societal norms, expectations and etiquette as well as moral decision making and consequences. Its role is crucial in answering a child's questions about her identity and rightful position within her culture and society. There are no rules for talking animals, their magic and unpredictability gives space to explore and to experiment with ideas and concepts which are not normally explored openly in human society. Anthropomorphism has long been a trope of children's literature, stemming from Aesop's Fables, believed to have been written between 620 and 564 BC. According to Margaret Blount, Aesop 'used the attractive power of animals and narrative to get at his audience in a peculiar way, and the method has been seized on, enlarged, used

[7] Monica Flegel, *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature: Animality, Queer Relations, and the Victorian Family* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 62.
[8] Flegel, p. 3.

and copied until […] the animal moral tale becomes almost wearisome'.[9] True as this may be, the animal moral tale has yet to become wearisome, as almost 40 years on from Blount's comments, animals continue to feature in children's literature, and the popularity of Potter's work in particular has certainly not decreased. We only have to look at the ways in which the 150th anniversary of Potter's birth was celebrated to evidence this.

More recently, we have seen children's cartoons that use the typical animal moral tale concept continue to have popularity. The pre-school animated series *Peppa Pig* follows the female anthropomorphic pig, Peppa and her friends and family. The cartoon has worldwide popularity and its franchise includes a movie, a theme world and several children's books. It is aired in 180 countries and is worth over $1 billion.[10] There is a clear market for the animal moral tale today.

Perhaps Potter's continued popularity centres on the fact that her tales are much more than a conduit through which to give moral guidance; they also act as a device to comment on wider political issues that were prevalent during the time she was writing. Potter was not the only writer to use anthropomorphism in this way - Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows*, were published around the same time as Potter's, using the same literary mechanisms as her to comment on their society. Little has been written on Potter's work in comparison to theirs. *The Jungle Book* especially has received a huge amount of critical response with most agreeing that it was written as an allegory for the British Empire. Kipling was a controversial author, known for his 'preparedness […] to use his writing for political ends'[11] and he remains the youngest literature laureate wining the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1907. For Potter, it is possible her small charming books about talking farmyard animals have avoided such scrutiny, dismissed as simply children's bedtime stories.

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[9] Margaret Blount, *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), p. 34.

[10] Simmy Richman, TV Cartoon Peppa Pig – now worth $1bn a year- is making the leap to the big screen, The Independent, 12 February 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/tv-cartoon-peppa-pig-now-worth-1bn-a-year-is-making-the-leap-to-the-big-screen-10042742.html> [accessed 26 September 2018].

[11] Howard J Booth, Introduction, *The Cambridge Companion to Rudyard Kipling, Cambridge Companions to Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 1.

As Roger Sale notes in *Fairy Tales and After*, Potter is concerned with 'smallness – small books, small writing, small animals.' It is this smallness which is used 'to force concentration from her reader' and 'highlights the importance of the actual page as 'even the large amount of white blank space on many pages is important, because that too forces us to concentrate'.[12] Her body of work is far more than just a collection of bedtime stories for children; a close reading of her tales clearly shows there are some important themes encased in these small white books.

In *Understanding Children's Literature*, Peter Hunt notes:

> Children's books are different from adult's books; they are written for a different audience, with different skills, different needs, and different ways of reading; equally, children experience texts in ways which are often unknowable, but which many of us suspect to be very rich and complex. If we judge children's books (and we do it unconsciously) by the same value systems as we use for adult books – in comparison with which they are bound by definition to emerge as lesser –we give ourselves unnecessary problems.[13]

Whilst this is true, there is no reason why children's books cannot contain adult or mature themes and, moreover, cannot be enjoyed by adults as well as children. Despite, as Hunt notes, the ways in which children experience books is 'unknowable', we can assume that in the case of Potter's books, there is appetite for these stories as they are still being printed, adapted for stage and screen and celebrated by children and adult alike over 100 years after they were first published. Bruno Bettelheim argues in *The Uses of Enchantment* that the fairy tale should communicate in a way which 'reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult'.[14] This certainly seems to be the case with Potter's writing. In an article written for the Guardian in 2006, Stuart Jeffries recalls how when reading *The Tale of Tom Kitten* to his daughter he 'flung the book across the room in disgust (only, intrigued, to pick it up again soon after)'.[15] In his re-reading of Potter's oeuvre he

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[12] Roger Sale, *Fairy Tales and After: From Snow White to E. B. White* (United States of America: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 127.
[13] Peter Hunt, *Understanding Children's Literature* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.
[14] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment – The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), p. 5.
[15] Stuart Jeffries, 'The Ugly Truth about Peter Rabbit', The Guardian, (2006) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/dec/07/booksforchildrenandteenagers> [accessed 9 August 2018].

discovers her darker side, her inconsistent approach to discipline and portrayal of violence, kidnapping and malevolent seduction. His reaction is a clear indication that the themes explored in Potter's books have something to offer to both children and adults beyond a typical animal moral tale.

Sonia Vogl notes in 'Animals and Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature' that:

> Biologists argue that children's' literature devoted to anthropomorphic creatures encourages the tendency to judge animals by human standards and on top of that, feel that ''Bambi syndrome' resulting from anthropomorphic treatment of animals is dangerous, both to humans and the animals, since most children (and many adults) come to view animals as cuddly, soft, friendly creatures which they can treat as pets.[16]

Anthropomorphism therefore seems to add another layer to Peter Hunt's argument against judging children's books by adult value systems. If, as Hunt suggests, we should not judge children's books by the same standards as adult's books – could one argue that it is therefore wrong to judge anthropomorphic characters against adult human values? In a recent study at the University of Toronto, researchers found that children's books with human protagonists have greater moral impact than those with animals.[17] This appears to be the first study which tests the belief that as children are naturally attracted to animals in fiction that through their anthropomorphism can act as a prism for human values and teach moral life lessons. The study compared the likelihood of a child to share after reading a tale about the value of sharing with an animal protagonist versus a human protagonist. The results found that children who read the story with the human protagonist were more likely to mirror their behaviour than those who read the story with animal protagonist. They conclude that 'for children at a very young age fantastical stories may not be as effective for teaching real-world knowledge or real-life social behaviours as realists ones'.[18] This is certainly interesting to consider

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[16] Sonia Vogl, 'Animals and Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature 'Animals and Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature', *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, 70, 1982 (1982) 68-72 p.68

[17]Nicole E Larson, Kang Lee and Patricia A. Ganea, 'Do Storybooks with anthropomorphized animal characters promote prosocial behaviours in young children?'(Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study: University of Toronto, 2017).

[18]Larson, Lee and Ganea.

with regards to Beatrix Potter's writing and her contemporaries. Perhaps the popularity of animal tales is less to do with their moral teaching, and more to do with their ability to excite and enchant a child's mind.

In 'Why Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature', Juliet Kellogg Markowsky gives several reasons which counteract any argument which considers anthropomorphism to be ultimately dangerous. Among her reasons, are the uses of fantasy, humour and self-identity, stating that children may 'identify with an animal which has human attributes' and argues that 'most children can identify with errant Peter in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit'.*[19]Perhaps most interestingly, she says that 'animals that talk, can let us in on another world which we may not be able to see without their help and […] lets us enter a world of woodland creatures with their own social structures and social behaviour that mimic and express our own'.[20] This is a really interesting viewpoint, the world Potter creates certainly mimics the societal structures of the time, but not only this, it mocks them too. Potter transfers the human world to an animal world, making it easier for a child to understand and identify with, but her dry humour mocks the way adults react to it.

Again, we can look to Bruno Betthleheim to sum up this idea. *The Uses of Enchantment* was written partly with the intention to help adults become aware of the irreplaceable importance of fairy tales and their enchantment in the development of a child. He writes 'for a story truly to hold the child's attention, it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity, But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination'.[21] He argues that a child finds 'meaning through fairy tales' and that through their representations of both 'good' and 'bad' become more relatable to child, as 'children know that they are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be.'[22] Potter certainly plays with these tropes of fairy tales in her writing. She presents her child audience with the enchantment of talking animals, but not only this, they are mischievous and have adventures outside the authority of their parents.

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[19] Juliet Kellogg Markowsky, 'Why Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature?', *Elementary English*, 52, 4, 460-462, p. 461.
[20] Markowsky, p. 460.
[21] Bettelheim, p. 5.
[22] Bettelheim p. 7.

Potter places herself as an omnipresent narrator in her tales which allows her to make comments for both her child and adult audience. The former does very much what Bettelheim talks about and uses enchantment to stimulate a child's mind, while the latter allows Potter to make subtle but sophisticated comments on the situations which she creates for her characters. Potter writes herself into her tales as a non-fictional character, interacting with the fictional characters she has created. She notes she is 'very well acquainted with dear Mrs Tiggy-winkle'[23] and that she once 'bought a pair [of old Mrs Rabbit's mittens] at a bazaar'.[24] Potter uses this position to ensure that her tales have an element of realism to them. She is trusted as an author, and if she writes that she has seen and interacted with these talking animals, who do in fact inhabit a world which very much looks like Potter's home of Sawrey, then it must be true.

Whilst Potter uses her presence as a way for her child audience to feel more connected to her story and suspend their disbelief, she also uses this as a way to make direct comment on the actions of her adult characters. We see this with characters such as Mrs Tabitha Twitchit, and Jemima Puddle-duck whom Potter refers to as a 'simpleton' for not seeing the fox's ulterior motives in his friendship with her. Potter uses her position as an omnipresent narrator, to comment on the way women in early nineteenth century England were forced to conform to an ideal of femininity which was becoming increasingly unrealistic.

In Jane Lewis's *Labour and Love* she writes 'Marriage and motherhood were Victorian woman's natural destiny and it was considered a tragedy if they were not achieved, or if one was achieved without the other'.[25] These achievements were part of an ideal of femininity characterised by domesticity, female bonding and a maternal predisposition. In Potter's creation of multiple female characters, she mocks this and attempts to portray her female characters as multi-faceted individuals with a propensity to encompass attributes and skills far beyond those which characterise this Victorian ideal of femininity.

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[23] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* (London: Frederick Warne, 1905), p. 32.
[24] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* (London: Frederick Warne, 1904), p. 11.
[25] Jane Lewis, *Labour and Love Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 5.

The role of motherhood in nineteenth century is interesting, particularly when it is viewed as part of an ideal that women were to live up to. In *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Deborah Gorham writes:

> In order to be considered a good mother, a woman would not only be expected to devote time and effort to her role, she was expected to approach that role in a new way. Motherhood came to be defined as a skill that had to be learned, rather than a behaviour that could be acquired simply by contact with other women who had been mothers.[26]

The notion of women learning the skill of how to be a 'good mother' plays to the idea that there is an element of performance to motherhood. Gorham talks about the expectation of mothers to 'perform' certain tasks in relation to bringing up their children and this active language certainly lends itself to the nature of a wider performance of an ideal of femininity. Jane Lewis talks of the effect of the restrictive nature of Victorian mothering with the countless advice manuals distributed to mothers resulting in both mothers and their children feeling the effects of societal imposed 'constraints'.[27] These 'constraints' materialise in Potter's writing as the clothing which her mother characters inflict upon their children. The animal child characters are forced into human clothing which is of course unnatural to them. As Mandy L. DeWilde writes in 'Victorian Restriction, Restraint and Escape in the children's tales of Beatrix Potter', 'the restrictive mothers, fashioned after the upper-middle class Victorian mother, want to domesticate their children and force them to confine their base instincts in the clothing they wear'.[28] This not only suggests that there is an element of the performance to the mothering depicted in Potter's writing, but it also confirms the notion that the animal-human boundary was becoming increasingly blurred at the turn of the century.

The Saturday Review published two articles in 1870 concerned with the motives behind the encouragement of female friendships in young women. The articles claim that the forming of female friendships was simply a 'rehearsal' for the 'serious business' of relationships with men. Whilst there is an element of truth to this, scholars have attempted to show that female friendships in fact served

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[26] Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1982), p. 65.
[27] Lewis, p. 15.
[28] Mandy L. DeWilde, 'Victorian Restriction, Restraint and Escape in the Children's Tales of Beatrix Potter', Masters Theses, p. 6.

multiple purposes socially and culturally. Most notably perhaps is Sharon Marcus, who in her study *Between Women; Friendship Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* writes, 'Victorians accepted friendship between women because they believed it cultivated the feminine virtues of sympathy and altruism that made women into good helpmates. But the embrace of friendships that trained women for family and marriage was not simply as one might darkly conjecture, an attempt to press women's bonds into patriarchal service'.[29]

This is at odds with many of the thoughts around the formation of female friendship as part of an ideal of femininity. Deborah Gorham in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* writes that the formation of female friendships in woman's adolescence helped establish her 'depth as a person' and played 'an important part in her development'.[30] She goes on to say, 'a girl who could not make friends was regarded with a degree of suspicion'.[31] So whilst formation of a female friendship could be seen as simply a tick in the box of long checklist of a characteristics defining femininity, it also served a purpose in the emotional development of women. It would be hard to argue that friendship is not an important part of one's development and life. However, this certainly makes the role of female friendships in the nineteenth century a complex one because, as Marcus says, 'female friendship reinforced gender roles and consolidated class status, but it also provided women with socially permissible opportunities to engage in behaviour commonly seen as the monopoly of men'.[32]This complex approach to the value of female friendships is something which is reflected in Potter's tales.

Whilst it is clear the female friendships were both encouraged and seen as important, there is little evidence of supportive female friendships in Potter's works at all, and this is particularly true with regards to friendships between young women. What we are shown, however, are various representations of interactions between older female characters. These interactions are often anchored around superficiality and are the quintessence of the performative nature of a Victorian ideal of femininity. This seems to be the crux of her representation of friendship; Potter does not dismiss the

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[29] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 26.
[30] Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1982), p. 113.
[31] Gorman, p. 113.
[32] Marcus, p. 26.

importance of friendships, rather she criticises those she sees as performative rather than truly supportive. Her stance on friendships is no doubt complicated, as despite the lack of supportive examples, we are presented with scenarios where her female characters would arguably benefit from them. Perhaps unwittingly, Potter highlights the importance of such friendships in her omission of them. This being said however, where Potter's characters are not in need of friends is in their endeavours in business.

Lewis states that 'mothers felt that their first duty was to provide for their children, which might necessitate going to work'.[33] This is certainly something that we see in Potter's writing - particularly with her widowed mother characters such as Mrs Rabbit and Mrs Tabitha Twitchit. This was not just restricted to mothers however, as 'both single and married women's work was an integral part' of the community.[34] This is confirmed by research by Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino in 'Risk, Success and Failure: female entrepreneurship in late Victorian and Edwardian England' who detail a culture where women were becoming increasingly confident in their abilities.[35] Again, this is reflected in Potter's tales as many of her female characters own their own businesses, supporting themselves and their family, quite often without the presence of a male partner. In *Victorian Ladies at Work*, Lee Holcombe summarises these changes well, 'In the mid-nineteenth century, ladies who had to work for their living were a surplus and depressed minority, who were pitied and pitied themselves. By 1914, middle-class working women, a respected and self-respecting group, were an essential part of the country's labour force'.[36] Potter reflects this changing attitude to the roles and demands of women and certainly had her finger on the pulse of the society which was changing around her.

Potter did not just write about women working, she also depicted them in her illustrations. In *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain*, Tim Barringer argues that 'the sphere of the visual image, and more specifically the representation of the male labouring body, provided the most

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[33] Lewis p. 14.
[34] Lewis p. 177.
[35] Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino, 'Risk, success, and failure: female entrepreneurship in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *The Economic History Review*, 70, 3 (2017) 837-858.
[36] Lee Holcombe, *Victorian Ladies at Work: Middle-Class Working Women in England and Wales 1850-1914* (London: David and Charles, 1974), p.20.

powerful and significant formulation of work as the nexus of ethical and aesthetic value'.[37] This is interesting, as it is often Potter's illustrations that portray more than her words. With regards to labouring, we are shown her female characters in roles which were typically less feminine. We are shown Kitty in *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots*, hunting with a rifle, and in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers,* Moppet and Mittens are shown hammering rats' tails on a fence to sell to their customers. In *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity,* Martin A. Danahay notes that 'clerical work' had been 'feminized' so 'women were moving into an area that would seem suitable in terms of gender preconceptions'.[38] However, it is not just typically feminised work such as shop keeping and cleaning which Potter illustrates, but physically intensive and demanding labour too. Potter seems to be therefore fairly radical in her depiction of female labour. This again strengthens my argument that Potter is far more interested in this element of womanhood than she is of those seen to be typically idealistic in a feminine framework.

In my first chapter, 'The Socialite', I discuss the ways in which Potter highlights a society that encourages friendship as a precursor to marriage, but excludes women who are unmarried or widowed. Paying particular attention to the friendship between Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Cousin Ribby, I show that in contrast to the work written around the importance of female friendships, Potter only showcases negative experiences of friendships to her audience. Focusing on the idea of friendships as part of an ideal of femininity, I will look at the ways in which friendship is shown merely as a role which Potter's female characters perform. Looking at the pomp and circumstance of the dinner party between Duchess and Cousin Ribby in *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan,* I explore ways in which Potter mocks the superficial nature of friendship in settings where elegance and performance are the priority rather than thoughtful conversation and support. Looking at the character of Jemima Puddle-duck, I will argue that Jemima's interaction with the foxy gentleman and her subsequent downfall is a direct result of her lack of a positive frame of reference for supportive friendships. Finally, using articles by Sharon Marcus in *Between Women* and Eve Sedgewick's

[37] Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 1.
[38] Martin A. Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 157.

Between Men, I will draw comparisons between the ways Potter depicts typically Victorian male and female friendships. I will argue that the way Potter portrays friendships between male characters in a way which is overtly positive in comparison to friendships between female characters could not be coincidental. Her male characters are allowed emotional and physical support from their peers which is genuine and lacks any sense of superficiality which is in stark contrast to the way she treats female friendships. There is not a denial of the importance of friendships, but a critique of those which were purely performative elements of an ideal of femininity.

The second chapter of this dissertation, 'The Simpleton', looks at Potter's portrayal of mothering in her writing. In an era where motherhood was seen as the pinnacle of femininity, Potter raises some interesting concerns around how the act of mothering also encompasses an element of performance. The title of this chapter is named after Jemima Puddle-duck whom Potter refers to as a 'simpleton' for not understanding the true nature of the fox's hospitality, and that it is just a way for him to control her, giving him access to eggs which he can feed on (ultimately killing her unborn children). Where critics have usually focused on the naivety of Jemima as the reason she is unsuccessful in her quest to have children, I will instead make the argument that Jemima represents the treatment of young unmarried women in want of a family. In this chapter I draw upon scholars in the field of Animal Studies to make an argument that Potter deliberately chose a duck to represent a young single female ready to have children despite her marital status. Potter was inspired by the farmyard animals surrounding her in the Lake District and her knowledge of the habits of animals is certainly not to be dismissed here.

Performance of mothering is a key discussion in this chapter, where I will look at the ways old Mrs Rabbit and Mrs Tabitha Twitchit cope as widowed parents with large unruly families. Focusing particularly on Mrs Tabitha Twitchit, I will argue that Potter uses this character to showcase negative aspects of mothering that are a result of a need to perform in order to portray an ideal of femininity. It is with regards to mothering that I will discuss the use of clothing of Potter's animal characters. We are often presented with images of mothers physically stuffing, fastening and tying their children into human clothing. As DeWilde writes, it is almost as though the parents are

'squeezing them into submission'[39] by forcing their children into clothes which are unnatural to them. I will argue that this not only acts as a metaphor for the restrictive nature of parenting in the Victorian era but also highlights the danger of this often-unnatural behaviour.

The third and final chapter, 'The Shopkeeper', will look at the labour roles portrayed by Potter's female characters. For the sake of clarity, when I refer to 'labour roles' I am referring to work, both in public and private spheres and that is both used as a means of employment and as a means of domesticity. Introducing discussion around Mrs Tiggy-winkle and Mrs Tittlemouse I will argue that both these characters use their skills in what are seen as typically feminine domestic roles, such as cleaning and ironing, to their own advantage either as means of employment or as a means of control. Again, discussing Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and old Mrs Rabbit I will look at the ways Potter portrays the changing economic situation of the era. Drawing on research by Aston and Di Martino, I will argue that Potter captures a point in time where women were finding their place in the world of business and entrepreneurship in her positive representation of females in business. A business woman herself, Potter uses her authoritative position of author and narrator to create career opportunities in business for her female characters. I will also argue that Potter works against the ideal of femininity by allowing her matriarchal characters to encourage their daughters in business. They do not encourage them in marriage or in friendship as a nineteenth century woman would be expected to; instead they involve them in their business and teach them the skills they need to succeed.

In this final chapter, I will also discuss the recently published *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots*. This tale is Potter's reworking of the 'Puss in Boots' fairy tale. The original version of 'Puss in Boots' sees a female character carrying out actions under the servitude of a male master. In Potter's version however, the cat has no master, and in writing this tale Potter enters a discussion which is centuries old, reclaiming a female space in an otherwise patriarchal and masculine story.

Fundamental to my argument will be the notion that in order to fully dissect the characterisation of Potter's female characters, her oeuvre must be considered as a whole. This

[39] DeWilde, p. 35.

includes the watercolour paintings which illustrate her writing. There is much to be said about Potter's illustrations as they often depict what is left unsaid; as Matthew Dennison notes, 'much of Potter's art has a narrative quality.[40] Her paintings are so crucial that at times it almost seems as though Potter's tales are a caption to her paintings rather than her paintings illustrating her writing. Potter's characters appear repeatedly throughout her collected tales, they appear in different scenarios and at different ages and points of their life. If we critique her tales separately, we judge only single aspects of their character's personalities. We see them as mother or as friend, or as entrepreneur; as child and as adult. In order to truly understand Potter's representation of female roles and the multi-faceted nature of female characters, we must look at her collection in its entirety.

Though I will not focus significantly on Potter's own life throughout this study, it would be foolish to dismiss the impact of her personal life on her writing completely. There have been countless biographies of Potter, most notably by Linda Lear and Leslie Linder; however, I will draw mainly on the most recent of these biographies, *Over the Hills and Far Away*, by Matthew Dennison. Dennison writes extensively on Potter's relationship with her parents which 'included a struggle between daughterly submission – endorsed by a society never fully rejected by Potter'.[41] The notion that Potter never fully rejected the society she lived in is an interesting one, as arguably her use of anthropomorphism is a result of this. She is able to shroud her opinions in a layer of fantasy giving them an element of disguise which is sometimes easy to ignore. This incomplete rejection of the society she lived in colours her writing as we see complicated and contradictory portrayals of friendship in her tales. This leads me to an ultimate conclusion around Potter's depiction of the roles of women in stories. She certainly included elements of an ideal of femininity and the two so -called pinnacles of achievement of motherhood and marriage. But she also depicts the most important role to her; the role of business and entrepreneurship. So, while she does not fully reject her society, she ensures she highlights a positive addition to it.

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[40] Matthew Dennison, 'The Art of Beatrix Potter' (The Spectator, 12 December 2015) <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2015/12/the-art-of-beatrix-potter/> [accessed 26 September 2018].
[41] Matthew Dennison, *Over the Hills and Far Away, The Life of Beatrix Potter* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2016), p. 110.

To conclude, I attempt to demonstrate Potter's sustained global popularity can be attributed in part to the notion that the themes she discusses in her writing with regards to female gender roles continue to have relevance today. Perhaps we can turn to Margaret Reynolds writing in 'The Financial Times' to summarise this complex and timeless author. In relation to the release of the movie 'Miss Potter' in 2006, Reynolds wrote 'Potter began as a Victorian. But by 1943 when she died, she was a thoroughly independent 20th-century woman. Now, in the 21st century, she can figure as an icon of contemporary femininity to be played in Miss Potter by Renee Zellweger, the Bridget Everywoman Jones of our time'.[42]

[42] Margaret Reynolds, A mind of her own Beatrix Potter's gentle animal tales belie their author's determination to achieve independence in a stifling society, Financial Times (13 Jan 2007) [accessed 5 September 2018].

Chapter 1

The Socialite: The role of friendship

The first televised animated series of Potter's works is named *The World of Peter Rabbit and Friends*. This correlates with the popular perception that Potter has made for us a friendly community of woodland creatures who inhabit the idyllic countryside in the Lake District, joyfully causing mischief and embarking upon adventures. It is indeed 'The World of Peter Rabbit' – but are there really any true friends in this place? Upon revisiting the stories, we can see how in most cases a title which suggests this world is full of friendships i.e. 'The World of Peter Rabbit and Friends' seems incorrect; the original ideas have clearly been translated into something more palatable for the screen. In fact, the very use of this word 'friends' is problematic, chiefly because the so-called friendships we are presented with are not always what they may seem, and this is especially true when looking at the portrayal of female friendships.

Potter published her stories one by one, and whilst she was slowly creating a world in which all these stories take place, they can be read individually. It is only when we consider the collection as a whole - including her carefully painted illustrations of the characters - that we can even begin to understand the true nature of the friendships in these stories. As Margaret Mackey writes in *The Case of Peter Rabbit,* 'the pictures are not simply an additional embellishment; they share with the words the task of conveying the import of the story.'[1] This is certainly true when it comes to her depiction of female friendships. Not only this, but considering her oeuvre as a whole gives a clearer picture of the relationships between characters as they appear again and again in the world Potter has built for them.

In exploring the relationships between characters in these tales, and in particular friendships between female characters, we can see that there were in fact very few real friendships depicted at all. Specifically, there are no tales which depict a strong network of friends or indeed any strong female

[1] Margaret Mackey, *The Case of Peter Rabbit; Changing Conditions of Literature for Children* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 12

friendships. It is this notion of friendship and how it shapes Potter's characters, and in particular her female characters that I will explore in this chapter.

A lack of female friendships seems at first unusual, as friendships between women were encouraged in late nineteenth century England. In two articles in *The Saturday Review* in early 1870, the argument was made that friendships with women were really only a 'rehearsal' for the 'serious business' of relationships with men.[2] Women were seen to be possessive, competitive and untrusting, with shallow relationships with women. In 'Female Friendships in mid-Victorian England: New Patterns and Possibilities', Pauline Nastor describes this as a 'proactively misogynist'[3] view point, however, it is interesting nonetheless as it hinges on the idea that friendships were simply a performative element for women who felt they needed to conform to an ideal of femininity. Deborah Gorham in *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* writes that the formation of female friendships was seen to 'foster femininity' allowing young women the chance to bond with their peers and learn the characteristics intrinsic to feminine behaviour. She wrote, 'a girl's desire to establish friendships with girls of her own age was not only regarded as legitimate, her ability to make such friendships was seen as a mark of her depth as a person.' She goes on to say, 'a girl who could not make friends was regarded with a degree of suspicion'.[4] (This will be interesting to refer back to when looking at some of Potter's characters who are friendless). However, some critics have written substantially on the value of female friendships despite the part they play in a 'rehearsal' before relationships with men. Sharon Marcus for instance has argued, 'the power of men to define women's lives and the centrality of men in women's lives were both real and important aspects of Victorian society […] our mistake has been to assume that those structural forces precluded the strong, complex, and socially

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[2] 'The Exclusiveness of Women', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art, 29, 747* (19 Feb. 1870), 242–3 https://search.proquest.com/britishperiodicals/docview/9395603/8DDE486823D9481APQ/1?accountid=8630 > [accessed 26 September 2018];'Friendship', *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* , 29, 742 (15 Jan. 1870), 77–8 https://search.proquest.com/britishperiodicals/docview/9362188/BDB5C8411A34135PQ/4?accountid=8630 [accessed 26 September 2018]

[3] Pauline Nestor, 'Female Friendships in mid-Victorian England: New Patterns and Possibilities', *Literature and History,* 17, 1, 36-47 (2008) p. 45.

[4] Gorman, p. 113.

acknowledged bonds between women'.[5] Marcus highlights the complexities involved in female friendships here, and this complexity is certainly reflected in Potter's writing.

In his recent biography of Potter*, Over the Hills and Far Away*, Matthew Dennison notes, 'in Beatrix's tales, examples of supportive female friendships are few'.[6] I would go one step further than Dennison and suggest that there are in fact no female friendships of any substance at all. Potter's writing is peppered with interactions between female characters which lack the depth both Marcus and Gorham mention. Female friendships are portrayed as superficial with characters more concerned with elegant dinner parties than thoughtful conversation. This is interesting, given so much work has been done to prove that female friendships had real substantial value in the Victorian era. It is only performance that we see in Potter's writing, she denies her characters the support of a network of friends that we know to be intrinsic to the development of a person's character.

The only depiction we have of a female friendship which could be seen as a positive female friendship is between the two dolls Lucinda and Jane who inhabit the doll's house broken into by Hunca Munca and Tom Thumb in *The Tale of the Two Bad Mice*. Notably these are human dolls which is in clear contrast to the main body of Potter's characters. However, this friendship is left undeveloped and frankly unclear. The only thing we know is that the two dolls cohabit seemingly peacefully – we do not know their age, their relationship or their circumstance. They remain quite simplistic, with little dialogue and little action. Interestingly, Marcus has written on the use of dolls in literature in *Between Women* writing, 'the doll was a metaphor for women's inferior status as playthings'.[7] This therefore seems to be a dark joke by Potter, the only positive friendship she shows is between characters who are the ultimate superficiality; playthings. The dolls certainly do serve as an interesting counterpoint to the majority of Potter's depictions of female friendships.

Upon examining the relationships between Potter's characters, it seems that many of these friendships are founded upon family ties as well; Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Ribby are cousins and

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[5] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 22
[6] Matthew Dennison, *Over the Hills and Far Away, The Life of Beatrix Potter* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd. 2016), p. 133
[7] Marcus, p. 155

Rebeccah is Jemima-Puddle-duck's sister-in-law. As Marcus argues, 'Victorians treated friendships and family life as complementary'.[8] So, whilst one could assume that family ties would bond these female characters closer together, this does not seem to be the case with Potter's characters, in fact it seems to have very little bearing on the strength of their relationships at all.

The majority of the female characters in Potter's writing are single, the presence of a partner or father to their children is rare and often there is no mention of them at all. Regardless of their marital situation however, this absence of a patriarchal figure would suggest a space for a friendship or companionship of some sort and the depiction of a strong female friendship would not seem out of place here. This seems the perfect opportunity for Potter to depict a strong female friendship outside of a patriarchal framework, however she chooses not to do this. Instead, we see models of friendships which are hierarchal, superficial and unsupportive.

In this chapter, I show examples of varying different frameworks of friendships depicted in Potter's tales. Paying particular attention to the friendship between Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Cousin Ribby in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* and *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan*, I will look at the way this friendship is based predominantly on hierarchy highlighting the superficial nature of their relationship. I will also look at the scenes between Ribby and Duchess in *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan* to demonstrate the performative and superficiality of their friendship. I will examine the relationship between Jemima Puddle-duck and her sister-in-law Rebeccah in the *Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* focusing on the absence of support for female characters. Drawing upon examples of friendly and familial exchanges between male characters, I will make a comparison between the way Potter depicts female and male friendships, arguing that Potter shows male friendships as far more supportive than female ones.

"He's a bad kitten, Cousin Tabitha; he made a cat's cradle of my best bonnet last time I came to tea. Where have you looked for him?": The hierarchical friendship between Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Cousin Ribby

[8] Marcus, p. 32

The Tale of Samuel Whiskers published in 1908 is one of two stories which include the relationship between the cousins Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and Ribby. In this tale, we first meet Mrs Tabitha Twitchit on her 'baking day' when she usually shuts her children away in a cupboard to stop them disturbing her and getting into mischief. On this occasion however, she cannot find her son Tom Kitten. Being an 'anxious parent' who 'continually loses her kittens'[9], this fills her with dread that he has been taken by the rats which she knows infest her house. Ribby, a cousin of Mrs Tabitha Twitchit, helps her to find her son and save him from the rats who have kidnapped him with the intention of making him into a 'roly-poly pudding.'

When Ribby arrives in this tale, her relationship to Tabitha Twitchit is unclear. At first, she is referred to simply as a 'neighbour' however when Tabitha Twitchit addresses her she calls her 'Cousin Ribby'. This would clearly indicate that the two cats are in fact related to one another and not just simply neighbourhood friends; though the initial description of her as just a 'neighbour' and a 'visitor' suggests theirs is a friendship of little depth and the fact that they are related has little to do with the closeness of their friendship. Among her first words to Ribby, Tabitha Twitchit establishes her vulnerable position '"I'm in sad trouble Cousin Ribby," said Tabitha shedding tears. "I've lost my dear son Thomas; I'm afraid the rats have got him"' (p.12). Though Tabitha Twitchit is clearly distressed, Ribby replies abruptly, and pointedly states her response '"He's a bad kitten, Cousin Tabitha; he made a cat's cradle out of my best bonnet last time I came to tea"' (p.16). This comment could be seen not just as a description of Tom Kitten, but a passive aggressive comment on Tabitha's parenting. I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. Cousin Ribby continues her lambasting of Tom Kitten: "I will help you to find him; and whip him too!" (p.16). It is interesting to note here that whilst Ribby resolves to help her cousin, she feels the need to comment upon the behaviour of Tom Kitten, and specifically of something which he has done to her. Her tone is hardly helpful, as she admonishes Tabitha Twitchit for her unruly children, assuming to punish her son for her, and

[9] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale Samuel Whiskers or the Roly Poly Pudding* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 7.

violently too. Just as Tabitha Twitchit is establishing her position of vulnerability, Ribby ensures that Tabitha knows who is in charge here. Her actions are very much intended to be a demonstration of her status. She is not simply volunteering to help find her cousin's son – this is revenge.

Arguably, this violence is something which characterises Ribby throughout this tale. Before her arrival, Moppet and Mittens have managed to escape from the cupboard their mother has shut them in and decide to cause mischief in the kitchen. It is Ribby's knock on the front door which startles them, causing them to hide: 'But just at that moment somebody knocked at the front door, and Moppet jumped into the flour barrel in a fright. Mittens ran away to the dairy and hid in an empty jar' (p.14). We do not know if Ribby's visit is expected; however, as we learn more about her temperament as the story continues, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the kittens are scared of her, and this is what causes them to curb their mischief and hide. Perhaps the whipping Ribby intends to give Tom Kitten is not the first time she has shown violence towards the kittens. Heather Evans, one of the few to have written critically on the *Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, charges Ribby with 'brandishing her umbrella like a sword'[10] as she searches for Tom Kitten, ready to fight the rats and claim him for her own. Her visit to the house may be unexpected, but the violence is not.

From the outset, Potter is establishing a hierarchy between the two characters through this dialogue but she cleverly reinforces this through her watercolour paintings of the Tabitha and Ribby which accompany the story. The first colour illustration (figure .1) we see of Tabitha Twitchit in comparison to that of Ribby (figure .2) helps to create this sense of hierarchy between the two female characters. Tabitha Twitchit is first shown on a landing of the staircase, she is small in comparison to the furniture, tucked into the corner underneath a grandfather clock with a large curtain as a backdrop. Her head barely reaches the tie-back of the curtain and her height is significantly smaller than that of the staircase banister. The image of Tabitha takes only a small proportion of the illustration. She is clearly a cat in a house built for humans. Her body language illustrates the fact that she is 'anxious', 'distracted' and 'mewing dreadfully'. Her arms are drawn in across her body and her gaze seems to be

[10] Heather A. Evans, 'Kittens and Kitchens: Food, Gender and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*', Victorian Literature and Culture (2008), 36, 603–623, p.604.

focusing on the corner of the floor making her look small and nervous, an anxious mother, scared to learn the fate of her child.

Figure. 1 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 9.

The first watercolour we see of Ribby, tells an entirely different story. She is shown at the threshold of the house in an open doorway. However, the perspective in this painting is different to the one of Tabitha. Ribby seems to be at the correct height for this door and as a standalone image, a viewer could assume that either she is a very big cat in a human house, or she is in the doorway of a house purpose built for cats. As readers, we can presume that it is a human house as we know that it is an 'old, old house, full of cupboards and passages' and that 'some of the walls were four feet thick' and was in fact based on Potter's own farm house at Hill Top Farm. It is therefore fair to say that Potter was using perspective here not to give us an idea of the physical size of Ribby but to comment on the size of her presence within the house, the family and therefore in relation to Tabitha Twitchit as well. She consumes space with her actions and her words, rendering those around her seemingly small and inferior.

Figure. 2 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 15.

Ribby acts almost as a foil to Tabitha Twitchit, highlighting the traits within 'a model of femininity characterised by nervousness, anxious maternal fears, and a predisposition towards baking'[11] with her bold and brazen character, declaring to be 'not afraid' of the rats which 'get upon [Tabitha's] nerves' and find Tom Kitten (p.19). After all, it is Ribby who concludes '"This is serious, Cousin Tabitha…We must send for John Joiner at once, with a saw"' (p.28) realising that the roly poly sound they heard in the attic must be connected to the kidnapping of her cousin's son.
Whilst it seems that Mrs Tabitha Twitchit would not have been able to locate and save her son without the help of cousin Ribby, the relationship between the two cats remains hierarchical and patronizing at best. Yes, Ribby does help her cousin find Tom Kitten but her motive behind this seems to be to prove that she is not scared of rats (as Tabitha Twitchit is) and to exercise some sort of punishment on him herself. There is no final resolution in the tale where the two female characters revel in their achievement and in fact Tabitha Twitchit does not even thank her friend for helping her.

[11] Evans, p. 604.

This is in stark contrast to another friendship between two cousins that we see played out between the male characters of Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny.

"Whatever is the matter, Cousin Benjamin?": The supportive friendship between Benjamin Bunny and Peter Rabbit

In a story akin to *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, in *The Tale of Mr Tod*, Benjamin Bunny's children are kidnapped and his cousin, Peter Rabbit comes to his aid. Whilst the premise of this story is similar to that of the one Potter explores in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers,* the dialogue and actions between the two male cousins are poles apart from that of the two female cousins. *The Tale of Mr Tod*, published after *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* in 1912 is another of Potter's darker tales – telling the story of Mr Tod (a malevolent fox who we will meet again in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*) who kidnaps Benjamin Bunny's children. Similar to the conclusion of *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers,* the bunnies are rescued just in the nick of time from their fate: becoming their kidnapper's dinner. It is the dynamic between the rescuers however which is most interesting, particularly as it allows us to compare the way Potter presents female and male relationships in regard to exactly the same situation.

Benjamin Bunny's children, who we are told are 'just old enough to open their blue eyes and kick'[12] are left under the supervision of their Grandfather, Old Mr Bouncer. It is whilst the rabbit babies are with their Grandfather that they are taken by a badger who intends to cook and eat them. Upon this discovery, Benjamin Bunny sets off immediately to find his children, without a word to his father whose poor baby-sitting skills have led to this rescue mission, and stumbles across his cousin Peter Rabbit, '" Cousin Peter! Peter Rabbit, Peter Rabbit!" shouted Benjamin Bunny. The blue-coated rabbit sat up with pricked ears, "Whatever is the matter, Cousin Benjamin?" (p.13). Instantly, we can see a difference in Peter Rabbit's reaction to Benjamin Bunny's cry for help to that of Cousin Ribby's to Tabitha Twitchit. Peter shows immediate concern for his cousin, and is quick to attempt to decipher his complaints, 'Is it a cat? Or John Stoat Ferret?' he asks, almost impatient to understand what is troubling his cousin so he can come to his aid. When Benjamin tells him, he is calm and 'reflective':

[12] Beatrix Potter, The *Tale of Mr Tod* (London: Frederick Warne, 1912), p. 12.

'let me use my mind, Cousin Benjamin; tell me from the beginning' (p.22). He is far more consoling of his cousin than Ribby is of Tabitha, he does not judge, and instead gives his friend hope. After rationally listening to his cousin's story, he can discern that 'there are two hopeful circumstances. Your family is alive and kicking; and Tommy has had refreshment'. This is a far more supportive reaction, unlike Ribby who almost approaches such a similar situation with glee and as noted above, casually wanders around the house, brandishing her umbrella like a sword. These two situations are almost identical; one cousin looks for their kidnapped child, while the other cousin helps. The only difference in these two scenarios is the gender of the characters. However, the contrast in the actions of the characters is so stark that it cannot simply be a coincidence for Potter. In doing this, it seems Potter is suggesting that male friendships are more supportive than that of female friendships.

The difference in the illustrations Potter uses in this tale is also interesting to note. As discussed earlier, there is a clear hierarchy presented to us within the relationship between Ribby and Tabitha which is heightened by Potter's illustrations. In the *Tale of Mr Tod* however, quite the opposite can be said. The rabbits are rarely pictured without each other, they are drawn to be almost exactly the same size, at each other's side throughout. There is an interesting comparison to make here, as Peter and Benjamin seem to be demonstrating traits of what many would presume to be a feminine friendship. In fact, if we are to look at Potter's earlier publication of *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* we can see these characters as children, and it is clear that their friendship has been a supportive one right from the beginning.

Looking back at *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, published in 1904 we can see that this supportive and equal relationship stemmed right from childhood, this time however, it is Benjamin who is supportive of Peter. After losing his clothes in Mr McGregor's garden, an upset Peter is found by his cousin, wrapped in a red cotton pocket handkerchief. Potter notes how 'Little Benjamin sat down beside his cousin, and assured him'[13] deciding to help his cousin find his clothes and they walk away 'hand in hand' (p.20). Again Potter's illustrations reinforce the idea that the friendship between Peter and Benjamin is not only equal but supportive too, as she paints the cousins hand in hand and

[13] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* (London: Frederick Warne, 1904), p. 16.

linked with one another (figure .3), on three separate occasions. The fact that the two male characters are shown to be holding hands and physically close to each other is again interesting to look at in comparison to the way Potter presents the physical interactions between the female characters. The two rabbits are children when they are shown to be holding hands, and whilst it would not be uncommon to show male characters physically close in this way, it is still an attribute much more likely to be given to female characters – yet it is something Potter chooses not to do.

Figure .3 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* (London: Frederick Warne, 1904), p. 17.

The relationship between Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny feels natural in a way in the relationship between Tabitha Twitchit and cousin Ribby does not. There are no formalities between the two rabbits in the way there are between the two cats. Peter seems to sense that something is wrong with Benjamin, understanding that his cousin needs his help before entering into any sort of dialogue. The friendship seems to require little effort, and this is certainly not the case for Tabitha and Ribby whose conversation does not flow as neatly and attempts to establish hierarchy rather than equality. In her discussion around female friendships, Sharon Marcus writes ‘Victorians defined

female friendships as a lack of rivalry'.[14] If this is the case, then there is certainly no friendship between Ribby and Tabitha. The opposite can be said about the male characters, perhaps this is because there was comparatively little pressure on young males to forge friendships with their peers. In *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick refers to male friendships which are non-sexual as 'homosocial desire' which is bound up with 'male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry'.'[15] However we do not see this here, there is no rivalry and no entitlement between to the two rabbits, they are simply there to help one another – they do not need to prove anything to each other. Perhaps friendship was not seen as rehearsal in the way it was for young women nor was it about establishing masculinity for the benefit of their future wives. A lack of pressure to form good friendships makes it easier to form one when it is not under the scrutinising eye of wider society. In Benjamin Bunny and Peter Rabbit we see an example of a male friendship which was celebrated by Victorians.[16]

The continuous portrayal of a supportive friendship between two male characters, only further reinforces the absence of such supportiveness with female friendships. In both the *Tale of Benjamin Bunny* and of *Mr Tod*, the quest undertaken by one party to the friendship is successful. In the former, it is to reclaim Peter's clothing and the latter to save Benjamin's children. And whilst Ribby and Tabitha's quest to save Tom Kitten is successful, this is the result of competition and not out of loyalty. When Benjamin and Peter return home with the rescued baby rabbits, they are said to 'arrive[d] in triumph' (p.79) and whilst the 'rabbit babies were rather tumbled and very hungry', 'they soon recovered'. A successful adventure was had by all. However, in the case of Tom Kitten whilst he has been successfully saved, he is haunted by his experiences and continues to be 'afraid' of rats, and 'never durst face anything that is bigger than a mouse' (p.75). It is not celebrated as a victory and leaves a long-term impression on Tom.

From what Potter shows us, it would be fair to suggest that the friendship between Peter and Benjamin is real. She allows us to see them when they are vulnerable both as adults and as children – but crucially she shows us this friendship from the perspective of each individual partaking in the

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[14] Marcus, p. 14.
[15] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men*, *English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1985), p.7.
[16] Marcus. p. 32.

friendship. We see that each supports the other in times of need, and that is not something we are shown in regard to female friendships through Potter's works.

By looking at Potter's entire oeuvre, we can consider the theme of friendships in a much deeper way. Not only can we compare the presentation of male friendships with female friendships, but we learn more about the friendships themselves as Potter shows them in differing situations throughout her collection of tales as the same characters appear repeatedly. In reading *The Tales of The Pie and the Patty Pan* and of *Ginger and Pickles* (the former published *before The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* in 1905 and the latter published afterwards in 1909), we learn more about the characters of Ribby and Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and hence see more layers to their friendship. To read the *Tale of Samuel Whiskers* as a standalone story, it would be easy to see Ribby as the stronger of the two women but as we examine the relationship further by reading the tales which this relationship appears in, it seems there are more sides to this adding to the sense that these characters do not share a strong or remotely real friendship.

'Next time I want to give a party – I will invite Cousin Tabitha Twitchit!': The performative friendship between Ribby and Duchess

The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan was one of Potter's own favourites and tells the comic story of a dinner party gone wrong between the host Mrs Ribby and her canine guest Duchess. I will discuss the relationship between these two characters later in this chapter; however, I will focus firstly on the appearance of Tabitha Twitchit in this tale as this helps us to understand the truer nature of that between her and Cousin Ribby.

At the beginning of the tale Ribby sets out to choose which single guest will come to her party (if you can call it that). She chooses Duchess, a 'most genteel and elegant little dog' who while 'she eats a little fast' is 'infinitely superior company to Cousin Tabitha Twitchit'.[17] Presumably Tabitha Twitchit did not know she was a potential guest, but regardless she seems jealous of the invitation and is 'disdainful' upon finding out about the party after 'pleasant gossip' with Ribby.

[17] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of The Pie and the Patty-Pan* (London: Frederick Warne, 1905), p. 8.

Whilst their friendship does not seem to be the strongest Potter suggests that Tabitha is upset that this is not the case. The description of Tabitha as 'disdainful' does suggest that there is an element of emotion attached to this relationship, which she attempts to hide with idle chit chat and gossip whilst feeling hurt at their stunted and superficial friendship. Tabitha seems genuinely upset by this interaction, but Ribby seems entirely clueless to her reaction. Interestingly, Philippa Levine has argued that 'women close to one another happily and frequently discussed their other close companionships without seeming rivalry.'[18] This confirms the idea that Tabitha and Ribby's friendship was not a close one at all.

Staying with *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan*, another depiction of a female friendship which is of note is the one between Ribby and Duchess. Keen to show off her skills as a cook and host, Ribby invites Duchess to dinner for a homecooked pie which she promises is 'so very nice… you never tasted anything so good!' (p.7). This dinner party for two descends into an absurd tale hinging on the desire to keep up appearances and ultimately destroying a potential friendship.

Upon her invitation to the party, Duchess so very nearly plucks up the courage to forewarn Ribby that she is not fond of mouse. '"I will come very punctually, my dear Ribby"' she writes, then adding '" I hope it isn't mouse?' (p.8) before changing the last two words to 'will be fine', deciding it 'did not look quite polite' to mention her distaste for mouse. Here ensues a tale of anxiety, of sneaking around and slyly swapping pie pans, of confusion and of performance ending perhaps unsurprisingly with Ribby declaring '"Next time I want to give a party – I will invite Cousin Tabitha Twitchit!"' (p.56), another nod to the superficiality of the relationship between the two cousins.

One could argue, that at the time of writing, a person would be expected to eat what was given to them at a dinner party such as this regardless of whether it was to their taste or not, however, whilst Potter is progressive in so many of her other themes, why does she not allow one of her characters to simply suggest she may not like what her friend is cooking for her? Her characters can be so bold in so many other ways but something as simple as this seem a struggle. This again demonstrates that many of the female relationships in these stories lack any sort of depth and are

[18] Philippa Levine, *Feminist Lives in Victorian Britain* (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1990), p. 71.

constrained by imposed structures of deference. The characters are acting how they think they should behave rather than what is natural to them.

Similar to the hierarchal nature of the relationship Ribby shares with Tabitha Twitchit, Ribby is quick to assert herself as the most important personality in that which she shares with Duchess. From the offset, her invitation is presumptuous '" *you* shall eat it all!'" she demands in her invitation. It seems Duchess has little choice in whether she attends the party or not, and when she does go, she will be forced to eat everything on offer. Before the event, both characters spend their morning in the village running errands. Potter notes that they pass each other in the street however, 'they only bowed to one another; they did not speak, because they were going to have a party' (p.20). This is a bizarre scenario but suggests that their friendship exists solely for the purpose of the performance between host and guest. Neither character holds precedence here - there is a simple acknowledgement between them as they conceal the true purpose of their outings; Ribby to make sure her cousin knows she is having a dinner party to which she is not invited and Duchess to break into her host's house to swap the pie with hers, ensuring she will not in fact eat mouse.

When it is finally time for this curious dinner party to take place, the opening scene paints an ever-increasingly strange idea of the relationship between the cat and dog:

" I will pour out the tea, while we wait. Do you take sugar, my dear Duchess?"

"Oh yes, please! my dear Ribby; and may I have a lump upon my nose?"

"With pleasure my dear Duchess; how beautifully you beg! Oh, how sweetly pretty!" (p.32)

It is evident here who is in control of this friendship – but this seems to be a natural course of action. Duchess does after all, ask for the sugar to be laid on her nose, but Ribby reacts as if this is normal. However, it is the use of the word 'beg' here which makes it very clear to the reader who is in the position of superiority. Again, we must consider this idea of performance – Duchess seems content to perform and beg sweetly like the domesticated animal that she is. She is showing off her skills as a performer to Ribby but the relationship here seems more like Jester and Queen rather than an equally weighted friendship. During her performance, the sugar cube falls from her nose, and we are told how she goes 'hunting' under the table to find it. These two sides to her personality seem at odds with each other. She is playing at being 'elegant' and 'genteel' whilst fighting against her natural animal

instincts to hunt. She certainly seems to be resisting domestication here which ultimately results in the failure of any sense of friendship between her and Ribby who seems to have mastered the art of such a performance. Strange as this all is, perhaps we can look again to Sharon Marcus to add some context. She writes that friendship 'provided women with socially permissible opportunities to engage in behaviour commonly seen as the monopoly of men; competition, active choice, appreciation of female beauty'.[19] If this is the case, then we can see some of these elements played out within this tale. The characters seem to be inwardly competing over their homemaking skills and Ribby comments on the elegance of Duchess' playing – however what they do not seem to exercise is active choice. We are still left with the resounding idea that this is all a performance. If there was active choice in this friendship surely Duchess would have made her feelings known about the mouse. The final sentence Potter leaves us with in this story really encapsulates the overall nature of the female friendships depicted in her tales. At the close of the dinner party, and while Ribby is clearing up, she says to herself '"Next time I want to give a party – I will invite Cousin Tabitha Twitchit!" (p.56). For Ribby, there is no loyalty to her friends or the other females in her life. For her it is more about the act of throwing the dinner party, then it is about who attends; it is the performance of the friendship which is important, not the individuals participating in it.

The common denominator in the friendships discussed in this section is of course Ribby who arguably is the root of the superficiality. As I discussed earlier, there is a suggestion that Tabitha Twitchit is hurt by Ribby's decision not to invite her to her dinner party and to subsequently gloat about it. For Duchess, the relationship is worse, as after *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan*, Duchess does not appear in any other tales alongside Ribby. It seems that Ribby's friendships are just a series of unique performances with other female characters and she does not seem to see nor value the potential of longevity in a relationship. Ribby is merely a socialite, jumping from one social occasion to another with no concept of how to maintain friendships beyond such interactions. Even though she concludes that she will invite Tabitha rather than Duchess to any subsequent diner parties, this is not about growing and maintaining friendships but about choosing the correct audience for her

[19] Marcus, p. 26.

performances. It would be fair to say that both Tabitha and Duchess would be pleased to be the friend of Ribby as she has shown them good hospitality and sympathy, but Potter does not allow this.

In her portrayal of Ribby, perhaps Potter is warning her readers of the potential impact of performing the duties seen to be part of being a woman, rather than executing them honestly. As Ribby's dalliances in friendships seem to be little more than superficial acts, she causes damage outside of just herself, pushing her female peers further away, leaving a path of destruction behind her often causing not only herself but her peers to become isolated and left without support. We could look at Ribby from another angle. We are not given any indication as to Ribby's marital status, she is not referred to as a 'Mrs' as other characters are and she has all the classic traits of an old Victorian spinster. She wanders around Tabitha's house brandishing her umbrella, sparks fear in her young nieces and nephews and crucially does not seem to be able to form friendships. There is no mention of a partner (whether dead or alive) nor of any children. We can therefore assume that she is unmarried. If we look at the model of friendship whereby a woman's ability to form a female friendship is indicative of her ability to form a romantic relationship with a man, then perhaps we could argue that Ribby's spinsterhood is a direct consequence of her inability to form friendships with other women. Her attempts to form friendships are transparent in their performance, she barely acknowledges Duchess's presence outside of the dinner party and uses every opportunity available to show her superiority to her peers. In Ribby, Potter could be showing us the ultimate consequence of a world without female friendships – spinsterhood.

I have not the patience to sit on a nest for twenty-eight days; and no more have you, Jemima. You would let them go cold; you know you would.": The unsupportive friendship between Jemima and Rebeccah Puddle-duck

Ribby is not the only character Potter creates who misunderstands true friendships, the theme is used throughout her works and included again in the *Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck*. Published in 1908 – this is a dark and disturbing tale – particularly when considered by a twenty first century reader. Here we are presented with a brief depiction of the relationship between Jemima Puddle-duck and her sister-in-law Rebeccah. The only interactions between the two characters within this tale take

place within the first couple of pages, however, we can derive quite a lot from what little dialogue is given to them. Despite Potter's demeaning description of Jemima as a 'simpleton' (which I discuss in more detail in relation to motherhood in the next chapter) she is a brave and headstrong duck, deciding to flee the farmyard 'annoyed because the farmer's wife would not let her hatch her own eggs'.[20] When she confides her decision to her sister-in-law, Rebeccah responds coldly '"I have not the patience to sit on a nest for twenty-eight days; and no more have you Jemima. You would let them go cold; you know you would!"' (p.8). Again, this is another demonstration of what Potter does continuously throughout her works; denies her characters any support from other female characters. This is the first time however, that we see any substantial consequence.

Denied any sort of moral support or even thoughtful rational conversation, Jemima decides to leave the Hill Top Farm. Where she has not found it among her peers in the farm yard, Jemima seeks friendship elsewhere. If Jemima is not careful, she will end up like Ribby, a spinster without any true friends. Upon her departure from the farm, Jemima meets 'a foxy gentleman' (p.35) who offers his barn as a nesting place. To the reader, it is clear that the fox has an ulterior motive, lulling Jemima into a false sense of security while his intention is not to help her, but to devour her! And whilst Potter herself blames Jemima's apparent blindness to the situation on the fact that she is a 'simpleton', I would argue that this is in fact down to the lack of female friendship in her life.

Despite the fact that Potter's oeuvre puts her firmly in the children's literature genre, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* is much more than a cautionary tale warning children of the dangers of trusting strangers, something bigger is at play here. With the lack of support from her sister-in-law and apparently little more from her peers (Jemima mentions a 'superfluous hen' (p.24)), Jemima is essentially cast away from the farm yard because she dares to go against social norms and 'determined to make a nest right away from the farm' (p.11). She is forced to leave the safety and the security of the farm and the network of female peers (despite their limited support) to set up her home elsewhere.

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[20] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (London: Frederick Warne, 1905), p. 7.

Upon meeting the fox, Jemima immediately trusts him, and whilst she does note one or two odd factors (she is 'surprised to find such a vast quantity of feathers' (p.31) in the barn) she ultimately takes him at his word, 'that he should be proud to see a fine nestful in his wood-shed' and she can stay 'as long as you like'. He is continuously referred to as a 'gentleman' who is 'polite' and 'hospitable' and whilst Potter's illustrations show the reader a little more than what Jemima is seeing herself – we must not forget that this is the first time anyone has offered her any sort of support in her decision to hatch her own eggs or indeed shown her any sort of friendship. Her trust in the fox comes from the lack of support from her peers back at the farm. What other option does she have?

If her friends do not support her in her quest to hatch her own eggs well then, she must make do with what she can. Perhaps Jemima is in fact a 'simpleton', but this may be attributed to the fact she has not been allowed a supportive friendship. Jemima Puddle-duck is too trusting of the fox – she trusts him with her children's life – but he will ultimately destroy her sense of being, as we see at the end of the tale. However, in my opinion, this is not because she is simply too naïve to live beyond the farm yard but the tragic end to this tale is caused by her lack of a clear frame of reference for what a friend truly is. Because of this, she does not recognise that the fox's offer of support is driven by his ulterior motive to ultimately kill her but instead believes it to be a true act of friendship. If her peers at the farmyard had attended to their friendships with more care, Jemima would have been able to understand that all is not always what it seems when it comes to forging friendships.

The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck is the only story in Potter's collection which incorporates the portrayal of friendship between younger female characters. It is surprising that the differing age of the characters does not seem to have any effect of the portrayal of the friendships. If women were encouraged to build up friendships at a young age in the era that Potter was writing, this is not something we see in her stories. Perhaps Potter is showing the importance of building friendships with the right person, rather than relying on what is available through proximity and familial ties. It is Rebeccah Puddle-duck who is named as being the most forthright in her disapproval of Jemima's decision and therefore the most unsupportive. Perhaps Jemima has chosen the wrong female to attempt to be friends with which ultimately affects her development of femininity. By aligning herself with Rebeccah, she is given a model of female friendship which will fail her in her attempts at

forming any relationships beyond this. Her choice of a friend in her pre-marriage, and pre-parent years has impacted her life in a long-term way. She has become anxious and traumatised by the situation she was lead to because of a bad female friendship. If Jemima had forged friendships which were more supportive, perhaps she would not be in the situation she finds herself in at the end of the tale at all. In having friends who turn out to be so unsupportive, has Jemima shown herself to be a poor judge of character? Is she likely to spend the rest of her days as an unmarried spinster like Ribby? If the rest of Potter's tales are anything to go by, we can assume that this will probably be the case.

The depiction of female friendships in place of romantic relationships in popular culture is very much part of the zeitgeist at the moment. The Walt Disney Company for example has only recently started to produce movies which allow a large proportion of the plot to centre around female friendships. One would only need to look at the success of *Frozen* released in 2013 to see this. The movie has been hailed as 'transformative…for both Disney and women in Hollywood'.[21] It follows the journey of one girl's journey to find her estranged sister and was praised for its depiction of strong female characters. 'Frozen-mania' was felt worldwide, as the movie grossing $1.2billion, won Oscars, topped charts with its soundtrack and has now taken to the stage on Broadway. The reaction to this is clear evidence that the depiction of strong female friendships is very much part of the cultural conversation today.

The perception of the world that Potter has created is that one of 'friendship' - so much so in fact, that when her oeuvre came to be translated on screen – *The Complete Tales* by Beatrix Potter became *The World of Peter Rabbit and Friends*. Clearly something was lost (or in fact gained) in translation. There has since been another animated television series based on the characters created by Potter. Originally aired between 2012 and 2016, the simply titled series *Peter Rabbit* follows the adventures of Peter Rabbit, his cousin Benjamin Bunny and introduces a new female character named Lily Bobtail. Whilst one may think it is unusual that the writers chose to create an entirely new

[21] Dorain Lysnkey, Frozen-mania; how Elsa, Anna and Olaf conquered the world (The Guardian, 13 May 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/13/frozen-mania-elsa-anna-olaf-disney-emo-princess-let-it-go> [accessed 26 August 2018] .

character instead of utilising an existing female character from Potter's work, it is interesting that it has been done so nonetheless. Lily Bobtail is the cleverest of the characters in the series, she has a 'just in case pocket' sewn into her dress which is home to numerous useful objects to help out the trio in their adventures and she is known for her catchphrase 'I know that for a fact'. It is tempting to argue that the addition of a new strong female character in the series is good and somewhat modernises the tales, yet the depth of friendship between female characters remains lacking. It is still lead by the portrayal of friendship between male characters, rendering the addition of Lily Bobtail somewhat tokenistic.

In examining the female friendships portrayed in *The Tales of Jemima Puddle-Duck*, of *Samuel Whiskers* and of *The Pie and the Patty Pan* it seems for the most part, Potter's female characters are concerned with their domestic roles and the perception other female characters have of them rather than forging true and strong friendships between one another. Externally they are all competing to show who is a better homemaker, whose maternal instincts are better, who can bake the best pie, but this is little more than a performance crafted to showcase their finest acts of a female. Look a little deeper and we see they have the same struggles, but Potter does not allow them to exceed the boundary of their performance and create any sense of relationship which is not contained by the shroud of superficiality. These characters are not allowed to share their collective female experiences in a manner which would bind them together. Levine has argued that 'the closely-knit networks with women's circles were invaluable in creating a new and freer social world for women'[22], however this is simply not something that Potter affords her characters. And while Potter does allow her female characters an element of freedom, the siloed experiences of these characters stunts this freedom.

There are two characters throughout Potter's oeuvre which seem to be the perfect candidates to forge a supportive friendship; old Mrs Rabbit and Mrs Tabitha Twitchit. They have a shared experience in that they are both single parents (we assume they are both widows), they have a brood of unruly children (young girls and one particularly mischievous son) and they both own their own business. Their similarities and collective shared experience would suggest they could forge a

[22] Levine p. 70.

supportive friendship between each other. Perhaps Potter does not entertain this as they are different species, however this doesn't seem to be a problem between Ribby and Duchess; a cat and dog. There is little evidence to suggest why this could be but it is interesting to consider nonetheless. Perhaps they, as animals, are still bound by a food chain and a bond between a cat and a rabbit is a little too dangerous.

Despite critics such as Marcus and Gorham who have argued the intrinsic value of the formation of female friendships in the nineteenth century and that it was so much more than a precursor to marriage, it is simply not evident in Potter's work. However, as modern-day readers, we can see that a lack of supportive friendships often leads to failure or unsatisfactory consequences for Potter's female characters. This is particularly the case with Jemima Puddle-duck who may never have encountered the fox if Rebeccah had shown her respect and sympathy and help. Friendship for Potter is certainly a problematic area as she almost highlights the importance of friendship in her omission of them. The Victorian society was 'a society never fully rejected by Potter'[23] as Dennison notes, and it is this which is perhaps at the root of Potter's complicated depiction of female friendships. Marcus writes that 'as an ideal, friendship was defined by altruism, generosity, mutual indebtedness and a perfect balance of power'.[24] Potter's depictions of friendship almost unanimously demonstrate the complete opposite of this, which is unlikely to be a coincidence. It is clear that Potter had a negative attitude towards the ways in which Victorian culture encouraged friendships solely for their use their use in establishing femininity and as a precursor to marriage. It is less to do with the importance of friendships, but a critique of those which were seen as simply performative.

[23] Dennison, p .110.
[24] Marcus, p. 95.

Chapter 2

The Simpleton: The role of mothering

Beatrix Potter often wrote her stories in letters to children that she knew. Her intention was to entertain and delight her child audience with the world she created. She brought fantasy to the mundane, creating a space where the human world and the fantasy world collide - where animals could talk, dressed in little blue jackets, have adventures in gardens and farmyards and up chimneys. Her child characters are often mischievous, disobeying their parent's orders and finding themselves in tricky situations. Professor M. O. Grenby writes in *Moral and Instructive Children's Literature*:

> those who write children's books have always thought it part of their job to instruct their readers, whether in facts, religion, morals, social codes, ways of thinking, or some other set of beliefs or ideas. From very early on, authors and publishers realised that instruction would be more effective if it were made entertaining, and this sugar-coating approach – 'instruction with delight' – became enshrined in children's literature from around the middle of the 18th century.[1]

For Potter's works however, this does not seem to be a common theme. Through a close reading of many of her tales, it is evident that Potter is very much on the side of the child, often allowing her characters' misdemeanours to go relatively unpunished and deciding instead to criticise the actions of the parents rather than the child.

It is the critical nature of Potter's relationship with her parent characters, and primarily, her mother characters that I explore in this chapter. I argue that in fact in many of her tales, Potter uses the situations she creates to mock the parental techniques used by her mother characters, putting her child characters in physical danger. 'Jemima Puddle-duck was a simpleton' (p.39) writes Potter in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck,* a clear and blunt opinion of Jemima's parenting techniques and her willingness to leave her eggs unattended. Potter was certainly not 'sugar coating' in her narrative

[1] Matthew O. Grenby, Moral and Instructive Children's Literature https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/moral-and-instructive-childrens-literature [accessed 11 August 2018]

around mothering and the harsh nickname of the 'simpleton' is key in discussions around motherhood.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Potter's female characters perform an ideal of femininity of the Victorian era. I take this argument one step further, exploring how the performance of femininity extends into the performance of mother. They are not just attempting to portray an ideal of femininity, but an ideal of motherhood as well. I will explore the way that mother is depicted as one of the many roles that Potter's female characters perform and by extension of this attempt to include their children in their performance and aim to control the image of their children as well as their own. This is often presented as a tension between mother and child as the mother characters are often unsuccessful in their attempts to control their children's image in line with their own. In presenting us with such difficult relationships, Potter is suggesting that any attempts to extend their performance in such a way has a detrimental effect on their children. They spoil the image they are so eager to portray of themselves and often put their children at risk. Focusing particularly on the character of Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and revisiting *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* and *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, I argue that Potter uses the situations she puts this character in as a mother to mock the society which demands not only an ideal of femininity but an ideal of motherhood too, and look into the consequences that such performances of motherhood have on their children.

Whilst exploring the idea of performance of motherhood and femininity more broadly, I discuss the way the clothing of animal children characters could be seen as an extension of this performance. We see this particularly in *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, where, eager to keep up appearances to her guests, Tabitha Twitchit dresses her children in 'elegant' clothing ready to attend her tea party. This could be seen as an extension of her own performance, keen to show her guests her entire family reflect the image she wants to be associated with. Clothing is particularly interesting in relation to Mrs Tabitha Twitchit as she is portrayed as a cat, an animal who we associate with cleanliness and elegance, but also with performance and extraverted behaviour. In fact, Potter's decision to clothe her animal characters is something that a lot of the scholarly critique is centred around. Often this is in relation to anthropomorphism and wider discussions on identity. Alongside the idea that mothers clothing their children is an extension of their own performance, I am also interested in articles that

view this as a metaphor for restrictive Victorian parenting techniques. We are constantly presented with images of mothers forcing their children into ill-fitting clothes and tightly fastening buttons whilst reminding them of their boundaries as children. They are told not to wander too far, not to go outside, not to play in a neighbouring garden all whilst being forced into clothing which physically restricts their movement. Clothing is not natural to them as animals and ultimately as children. Notably, the children are always dressed by the mothers rather than dressing themselves which seems to accentuate the notion that the clothing is being done to them rather than for them. Clothing almost seems to stand in for parenting itself.

I look at these ideas in relation to Peter Rabbit and Tom Kitten and argue that by having her mother characters dress their children in human clothing, Potter is not only using this to accentuate the idea of performance, but also to highlight the dangers of restrictive parenting. Potter is suggesting that some of these techniques equate to almost unnatural behaviour with potentially damaging consequences to their development as individuals. I will also draw upon examples from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* to demonstrate the different ways in which clothing animals is used in children's literatures and the symbolism it can hold.

Finally, in particular reference to Jemima and Rebeccah Puddle-duck, I will argue that Potter uses the characters who do not have children to explore new ways of thinking around parenthood. I am particularly interested in the space Potter allows within her works for non-traditional family dynamics. It is somewhat radical for Potter to do this, particularly when we consider she also creates characters who chose not to have children like Rebeccah-Puddle-Duck or Jemima-Puddle-Duck who runs away in order to start a family the way she wants to.

The performance of the perceived ideal of femininity seems to affect that way Potter portrays these characters as mothers. I will make the argument that Potter uses her short tales to examine the way this has a negative effect on parenthood and mocks the way a society which creates a norm whereby women strive to conform to an ideal of femininity which in turn creates an environment which pushes them further away from the ideal of motherhood.

‘I am sorry to say, she told her friends that they were in bed with the measles; which was not true’: The performative mothering of Tabitha Twitchit.

Written in 1907, *The Tale of Tom Kitten* tells the story of Mrs Tabitha Twitchit who is preparing to entertain her friends. She dresses her kittens in human clothing and leaves them to play while she gets ready to receive her guests. Her children, left to their own devices, play in the garden and ultimately lose their clothing, causing their mother to hide them away from her guests, claiming they are ill with the measles as a way to excuse their absence to her friends.

From the beginning of the tale, it is clear that Mrs Tabitha Twitchit feels the pressure to impress her guests, part of which is to show her children off to her friends. In anticipation of their arrival, Tabitha ‘fetched the kittens indoors, to wash and dress them’.[2] By interrupting her children as they ‘tumbled’ and ‘played’ (p.7) to dress them in ‘clean pinafores and tuckers’ (p.16), Mrs Tabitha Twitchit is in essence extending her performance to her children. She wants to be able to show her children off at their best and not as they normally are. She is entertaining ‘fine company’ (p.8) and she needs the image of her family to reflect this.

Almost as soon as they are dressed, the kittens muddy and lose their clothing in the garden – having been sent out to play so their mother can continue preparations. Discovering her children with no clothes on, Tabitha declares ‘“My friends will arrive in a minute, and you are not fit to be seen; I am affronted”’. Tabitha’s anger is clear as she ‘pulled them off the wall, smacked them, and took them back to the house’ (p.47). Embarrassed by the behaviour of her children, Tabitha resolves to tell her friends that her children are ‘in bed with the measles’ which as Potter makes clear ‘was not true’ (p.48). Tabitha lies about the health of her children, rather than have a situation where they are not ready for the occasion. As we have seen in other tales such as *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, Tabitha is not always concerned with presenting her children and her family life a certain way – as she is happy to ask Cousin Ribby for help in finding Tom Kitten when he is kidnapped. However, on this occasion, this only adds to this sense of performance for Tabitha. She simply wants to keep up appearances and

[2] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (London: Frederick Warne, 1907), p. 8.

present a family life which reflects the 'fine company' of her guests and the 'dignity and repose of the tea-party' she is throwing (p.51).

Potter's narrative voice in this tale is particularly judgemental, as several times she criticises the actions of her Tabitha. She describes Tabitha's decision to send her children out to the garden as 'unwise' (p.20) knowing of course what will happen once they are there. This is unusual, as what is 'unwise' about a cat allowing her kittens to be outside? It is only when this animal behaviour is considered within a human world that it becomes unwise. Their behaviour whilst dressed in human clothing does not mean they act more human; they struggle and fight against it, recognising that it is unnatural for them. They are too young to understand what their mother is asking of them. Mrs Tabitha Twitchit on the other hand, becomes more human as she dresses in her human clothing and she attempts to extend this to her children's behaviour, but they are too young or ultimately too wild to be tamed in this way. Potter's narration becomes judgemental when she comments on Tabitha's decisions, which aid in the superficiality of her performance. 'I am sorry to say, she told her friends that they were in bed with the measles; which was not true' (p.48). Potter could be using this tale as a vehicle to highlight what she sees to be 'unwise' decisions with regards to motherhood, and in the lengths one goes to keep up appearances.

If we are to look at the chronology in which these tales were written, and through a close reading of the texts, we can see a potential unravelling of Tabitha Twitchit's performance. In *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, Potter notes that she will write 'another larger, book to tell you more about Tom Kitten' (p.52). She did so, with the publication of *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* in 1908. In this tale, Tabitha Twitchit seems less concerned about keeping up appearances, as she is described as an anxious parent and is keen to solicit the help of Cousin Ribby to find Tom after he has been kidnapped. The ease in which she asks for help could simply be down to an unguarded moment as she is not expecting Cousin Ribby to visit. However, with Cousin Ribby's comment on the behaviour of Tom Kitten saying that he 'made a cat's cradle out of my best bonnet last time'[3] we could assume she was one of the guests at Tabitha's tea party in *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (they socialise on many

[3] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 14.

occasions in Potter's world). Could it be possible that it was in fact at the party that Tom misbehaved in front of Cousin Ribby? Whilst it is not fully explored in the tale, it is suggested that despite her attempts to cover up her unruly children, Tabitha is ultimately unable to, as 'there were very extraordinary noises over-head' which 'disturbed' her party' (p.54), her children were clearly not in bed. This adds to the possibility that this dinner party was the beginning of the demise of Tabitha's performance. Potter seems to be suggesting that for all the pressure to conform to certain ideals and the performances which come with this, they are ultimately exactly what they are, performances. They cannot be extended or controlled past the individual performing.

In exploring the notion of performance, it is important to come back to the point that Potter is using her animal characters to emphasise the multifaceted nature of performance and the depth to which this exists in her society. Mrs Tabitha Twitchit is a cat, who in her performance of the human female is a participating in the performance of a Victorian ideal of femininity. These many layers of performance heighten the idea that 'mother' is one of many roles a woman can perform. No character encapsulates this more than Mrs Tabitha Twitchit, as we learn later in *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* written in 1909, that she owns her own business, adding business woman to her repertoire.

Through the character of Mrs Tabitha Twitchit, Potter mocks the way Victorian society created these ideals of womanhood and the importance that was placed on living up to the expectations that came along with this. Potter is more sympathetic towards the children in *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, she makes no excuse for their behaviour and is 'sorry' when their mother hides this from her guests. She is keen to allow them space to be what they are – children, or indeed kittens running wild and free as they should be. In fact, as I have already discussed, Potter promises to tell her readers more about Tom Kitten in the future and published *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* where we learn more about Tom's mischievous nature.

When exploring Potter's portrayal of motherhood, it is interesting to relate this to her use of clothing. A close reading of the tales in which parenthood is explored reveal that on many occasions, Potter gives us details as to *who* is clothing the children – and this always tends to be the mother. We see this in tales such as *The Tale of Tom Kitten* and *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and I explore how

Potter's choice to show us this detail could be seen as a mechanism through which she is highlighting some of her thoughts around Victorian parenting.

As we have already seen in *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, Potter uses Tabitha's preparation to entertain her friends as a way of showcasing how the pressure to conform and ultimately perform certain ideals of femininity have an effect on parenting. A part of this performance is the clothing which these characters insist upon for their children. At the beginning of *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, the kittens are pictured playing together without human clothing, as they would be in their natural habitat. Potter goes so far as to make a point of this herself, 'they had dear little fur coats of their own' (p.7). As mentioned earlier, Potter's narrative voice is on the judgemental side in this tale, and it is clear that she wants to highlight to the reader that the kittens have sufficient clothing of their own, their natural fur coats. When Tabitha dresses her children, Potter does not describe this in a positive way noting how the clothing is 'elegant and uncomfortable'. This juxtaposition of elegant and uncomfortable highlights the abnormal nature of this. The clothes are elegant but are of course not designed for animals. The clothing in fact acts as a costume for the animals, as Potter literally describes this as 'dress up' and only further aids this notion of performance. For the children however, it is also a form of restriction.

The idea of clothing as costume is an interesting one, particularly if we are to look at works written at the same time as Potter's such as Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the* Willows, published in 1908. Potter and Grahame were both writing stories about animals interacting in a human way however their presentations of this differ somewhat. Whilst it would not be helpful to go into the detail of *The Wind in the Willows*, it is interesting to note that what is ultimately a tool of suppression in Potter's tales is used to symbolise freedom in Grahame's. At the very beginning of *The Wind in the Willows*, Rat invites Mole to take an excursion on his boat. This is their first exchange, and very early on, Rat comments, 'I like your clothes awfully, old chap […] I'm going to get a black velvet suit myself someday, as soon as I can afford it'.[4] It is clear here that clothing is seen as something to aspire to. Rat comments that it is due to a lack of money that he does not own a velvet suit suggesting

[4] Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (Leicester: Galley Press, 1987) p.8

that clothing here is seen as a symbol of wealth. The idea of clothing symbolising wealth is not made explicit in Potter's stories, although one could argue that it could be part of the performance which the characters enact. Wealth and money are not explored in much detail throughout Potter's tales. Clothing is accessible to Potter's characters; we are told of their elegance and the clothes themselves seem easily replaceable (Mrs Rabbit is clearly capable of replacing Peter Rabbits clothing after he loses them). This would indicate that the characters are wealthy and are not aspiring to own luxurious clothing in the way that Rat does in *The Wind and the Willows* Perhaps Potter was highlighting that regardless of wealth – there was still an element of restriction for those with good fortune.

It is not just the clothing of the children, but the overall actions of preparing of the children for her guests which is used as a tool of restriction in *The Tale of Tom Kitten*. In Potter's illustrations, we see Tabitha scrubbing and cleaning her somewhat uninterested children. Moppet looks startled as her mother scrubs her face (figure. 1), Mittens is distracted, playing with her siblings as Tabitha brushes her fur and finally we are told how 'Tom was very naughty, and he scratched' (p.15) as his tail and whiskers are combed. The children clearly do not want to be tended to in this way and Potter's accompanying paintings illustrate this well. In fact, what is perhaps most interesting is the way in which Tabitha is depicted as cleaning her children. As the images show, she uses hairbrushes, scrubbing brushes and cloths to clean her children, rather than what a cat would naturally use; her tongue. She is using human methods of cleaning and preening rather than what is natural to her, further reinforcing the use of human and non-natural actions to suppress her children.

Figure. 1 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Tom Kitten* (London: Frederick Warne, 1907), p. 10.

Potter notes that Tom has become 'very fat' meaning some off his buttons burst of his jacket, however Tabitha persists and sews them back on. Her insistence on dressing her children in a clearly uncomfortable way begins to show us the restrictive nature of her parenting as she literally forces her children to play dress up into human clothing, clothing which does not fit and is not their own. Whether she realises it or not, she is restricting the freedom of her children, shoe horning them into shapes which are not natural or easy for them.

Similarly, when Tabitha sends her children out to the garden, she insists 'you must walk on your hind legs' (p.20). By instructing them to walk in a way which is seen as 'fine' or indeed as more human, she is not only adding this as another layer of her performance but she is also restricting the way her children should naturally be as kittens, using all four of their legs. We are told how 'Moppet and Mittens walked down the garden path unsteadily' (p.23) as they literally trip over the human clothing they are wearing which certainly serves as a barrier to them acting as they naturally should be. Tom Kitten too is 'quite unable to jump when walking up on his hind legs in trousers' (p.27). Potter tells us how they 'skip' and 'jump' whilst in this clothing which is a much more human way of describing their playing in comparison to the way they 'tumble' at the beginning of the story in their

own fur coats. It is only when they are free of their restrictive clothing and therefore of their mother, that they are able to play and act as kittens.

Potter takes quite some time in this tale to lay out just how unnatural it is for these kittens to be wearing such clothing. As I have noted earlier, the brevity of Potter's stories suggests there is importance in each word. There are no superfluous adjectives; she allows her accompanying watercolour paintings to truly illustrate her narrative in more depth. It is therefore almost impossible to ignore that Potter chooses to use a high proportion of what is a limited word count to explain the effects the human clothing has on the actions of the animals. Potter passes judgement on the situation and this is a clear indication that this is something Potter did not want her reader to ignore.
This link between restrictive parenting and clothing is not limited to this one tale – it is something we can also see in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*.

'It was the second little jacket and pair of shoes that Peter had lost in a fortnight!': The restrictive mothering of old Mrs Rabbit

In what is Potter's most famous tale, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, written in 1902, we are told the story of a mischievous young rabbit who, defying his mother's orders, goes into Mr McGregor's garden. Similar to Tom Kitten, Peter is restricted by the clothing he has forced upon him by his mother. Again, Potter uses clothing to highlight the perils of restrictive Victorian parenting as we see the protagonist dealing with the consequences of sticking to the regulations imposed on him by his mother.

In order to dissect the effects of old Mrs Rabbit's parenting techniques, we must focus first on the actions of her son, Peter. At the beginning of the tale, old Mrs Rabbit sends her children out for the day while she goes out to run errands. Her children are shown dressed in little jackets, with one particular illustration focusing on old Mrs Rabbit fastening the top button on Peter's coat (figure. 2). Similar to the imagery in *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, Peter looks uncomfortable, straining his head back so the jacket can be fastened tightly around his neck. Whilst it would be difficult to argue that the dressing up of her children is an extension of old Mrs Rabbit's performance of femininity, it is certainly fair to suggest that once again, Potter uses the children's clothing to highlight restriction

imposed by her mother characters. In *Victorian Restriction, Restraint and Escape in the Children's Tales of Beatrix Potter*, Mandy. L. DeWilde notes that in the illustration immediately after this, Peter is shown with his jacket undone which signifies his disobedience, 'rejecting his mother's power and influence over him'[5] and that 'he will soon cast off her warnings as a rabbit would cast off his jacket'.[6] This is similar to my argument around Tom Kitten and his siblings. Old Mrs Rabbit attempts to restrict and humanise her children, but Peter as a growing young male rabbit is rebellious and fights against his mother's attempts to restrict him.

Figure. 2 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (London: Frederick Warne, 1902), p. 13.

'Now run along, and don't get into mischief'[7], old Mrs Rabbit tells her children. Of course, Peter disobeys his mother and goes exactly where he is told not to; Mr McGregor's garden. Inevitably, Peter is discovered trespassing by Mr McGregor who endeavours to catch him. Again, similar to Tom Kitten and his siblings' escapades, it is the clothing which Peter's mother has dressed him in which creates a problem for him.

[5] Mandy L. DeWilde, 'Victorian Restriction, Restraint and Escape in the Children's Tales of Beatrix Potter (Grand Valley State University) p. 32
[6] DeWilde, p. 31.
[7] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (London: Frederick Warne, 1902), p. 12.

When Mr McGregor begins to chase Peter, he is shown running away on his hind legs wearing a pair of shoes (reminiscent of Tom Kitten and his siblings) a very unnatural way for a rabbit to run away from his hunter. After losing both his shoes (which we assume his mother dressed him in too), Potter notes 'he ran on four legs and went faster' (p.35). Again, Potter is using her normally scarce words to really highlight to the reader the unnatural-ness of the situation. Peter, running as he naturally should, is indeed so fast that Potter comments 'I think he might have got away altogether'(p.35). However, his clothing causes another problem for him as the buttons on his famous blue jacket get caught in a gooseberry net. Unable to escape, Peter gives himself up for lost and begins to cry.

If we are to accept the clothing Peter is made to wear as a metaphor for his restrictive mother, then we can see here how he is literally held back by rules and regulations imposed on him by her. It is only when Peter wriggles free of his jacket, shedding what has been imposed upon him by his mother, that he is able to operate freely and escape the garden. As DeWilde notes, 'Peter's problem is not, after all the clothing he wears, but the constrictive mother who insists he act unlike a rabbit and more like a domesticated child'.[8] Peter is caught in the net not because he is a rabbit, but because he is a rabbit in human clothing. His mother's attempts to restrict him and therefore humanise him are ultimately the root of the danger for Peter here. Where before he was 'frightened' and 'lost', Peter becomes more daring, understanding what he is capable of in a natural setting, free from the domestic restrictions of his human clothing. He is never closer to Mr McGregor than when he is unclothed, yet he is never as confident or sure of himself. Just as he makes his final bid to escape from the garden, Mr McGregor sees Peter but Potter notes that 'he did not care' (p.59) as he understands what he is capable of and slips underneath the gate without the fear that the large buttoned jacket will hamper him. He is free from his mother's gaze here, as he experiments with the way he can use his physicality and act in an unrestricted and wild setting.

Once back at home, Peter is of course scolded by his mother and sent to bed early. We are told it was the second little jacket and pair of shoes that peter had lost in a fortnight' (p.64)- which we

[8] DeWilde, p. 14.

can ascertain to mean, it was the second time that Peter has disobeyed his mother in a fortnight. We are not told where he previously lost his clothing, but we can hazard a guess that it had something to do with Mr McGregor and his garden. The fact that he has lost his clothing on more than one occasion, further adds to the idea that restrictions imposed upon Peter by his mother have potentially disastrous consequences but also shows us that Peter is not scared of his mother's authority.

This was not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Peter has to choose between conforming to his mother's rules as a child and exploring the world outside of domesticity – the one he will eventually grow up into and have to navigate for himself. Perhaps we could read old Mrs Rabbit's overly restrictive nature towards Peter, as her struggling with the transition of her son from child to adult. Given the size of Peter in comparison to his sisters in Potter's illustrations, it would be fair to assume that he is the eldest. Initially the depiction of Peter in a blue jacket and his siblings in red jackets seem to symbolise their difference in gender, however old Mrs Rabbit is dressed in blue as well. Could the colour of Peter's famous little jacket in fact be to symbolise his transition into adulthood? It certainly aligns him more with his mother than he is with his siblings. By dressing him in the same colour as his mother, we subconsciously associate Peter more with his mother than we do of his siblings – highlighting his similarity to his mother over his sisters. Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton-tail's decision to pick blackberries instead of going to Mr McGregor's garden is less to do with the fact that they are good bunnies and more that they are still young and therefore less likely to question the instructions from their mother.

Old Mrs Rabbit imposes the same rules and restrictions on Peter as she does his younger sisters. They are content to abide by these rules because of their age, however for Peter this seems too restrictive and he should be given the freedom to explore and make mistakes and do all the things one needs to in order to form one's adult self. His adventure into the garden is an act of rebellion – something we can all recognise in a teenage boy during the transition from childhood to adulthood. When old Mrs Rabbit insists that her children do not enter Mr McGregor's garden as their father 'had an accident there and was put in a pie'(p.11), this spikes curiosity and adventure in Peter rather than fear. Peter wants the freedom to explore and experiment, but ultimately and reluctantly, is still confined by old Mrs Rabbit's maternal need to mother and protect him. Peter is drawn to adventure

and experience and the freedom associated with adulthood, however is still restrained by the rule and regulations instructed upon him by his mother.

It is not that he is just disobeying his mother, the rules she is imposing on him are simply not working. The prohibition of Mr McGregor's garden makes it all the more appealing to Peter. Perhaps if old Mrs Rabbit were to accept that her son has outgrown the rules she has set for him, she would be able to guide him more safely through his transition to adulthood. Instead, Peter is left to navigate this world for himself, and isn't able to openly discuss his adventures or indeed misadventures with his mother which arguably ultimately leads to his downfall.

In 'A Wilderness Inside: Domestic Space in the works of Beatrix Potter', Daphne Kutzer argues that the domestic space of the burrow that Peter is only too happy to escape is also symbolic of the restrictions upon Peter:

> Yes, the sandbank is comfortable and safe from predators both human and animal, but it is also constricting and confining. The two illustrations that show Peter inside the burrow show him either asleep on the floor or tucked in bed and avoiding his mother's ministrations. In neither illustration is his face visible: it is as if his personality is obliterated within the confines of the burrow home.[9]

The title illustration of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* shows Peter shrunken underneath his bed cover whilst his mother towers over him attempting to feed him camomile tea. If the burrow is confining for Peter, it is because his mother makes it so - insisting on treating him like a young human child, rather than the maturing rabbit he is. It is old Mrs Rabbit's inability to accept that her child is growing up that causes her to restrict him so much. She knows that he is more likely to meet the same dangers as his father as an adult if he is free to visit Mr McGregor's garden, than he is as a child following her instructions under her roof. I don't think it is an intention of Old Mrs Rabbit to 'obliterate' her son's personality – but perhaps it is a consequence of her struggling to raise a teenage son.

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[9] Daphne Kutzer, 'A Wilderness Inside: Domestic Space in the Work of Beatrix Potter', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 21, 2, 204- 214 (1997), p. 211.

‘Jemima Puddle-duck said that it was because of her nerves; but she had always been a bad sitter’: The determined mothering of Jemima Puddle-duck

Throughout Potter’s oeuvre, I would argue that there is no story as interesting as *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* in relation the theme of motherhood. It sits in such stark contrast to all her other examples of motherhood and presents us with two completely new ideas in the differing ways in which women can perform the role of mother. We are presented with the female characters who are desperate to be mothers and those who choose not to be mothers. Written in 1908, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* tells the story of a duck, Jemima, who flees her farmyard in search of a place to nest and hatch her own eggs, free from the rule of the farmer’s wife who forbids her from doing so at the farm. As I have explored in my chapter around female friendships, Jemima falls victim to a dishonest friendship resulting in traumatic consequences for her both as an individual and as a mother.

The opening lines of *The Tale of Jemima-Puddle-Duck* are unusual; ‘What a funny sight it is to see a brood of ducklings with a hen! Listen to the story of Jemima Puddle-duck who was annoyed because the farmer’s wife would not let her hatch her own eggs’.[10] It is rare for Potter to instruct her reader directly to ‘listen’. Notably she writes ‘listen’ and not ‘read’, assuming that this tale is being read aloud to a child rather than read by the child themselves. This could be written off as a trope of children’s literature however, what is interesting to me is the forceful way it seems she is telling us to listen. This is an order. In no other tale does Potter give her audience such an instruction. It is clear that she is about to tell us a story of real moral importance here. Perhaps by using ‘listen’ instead of ‘read’ she is telling us to really listen and hear her opinions of motherhood beyond what can be read directly.

In a move in plain contrast to Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and old Mrs Rabbit, Jemima Puddle-duck seeks freedom over restriction for her children. Defying the rules of the farmyard in which she lives, Jemima decides to escape and raise her children by herself. By leaving the confines of the farmyard walls and going into the wild – she leaves domesticity and restriction behind, entering into the unknown in a defiant quest to raise her brood away from the limitations of the society she lives in.

[10] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 7

Jemima's annoyance at not being able to hatch her own eggs is clear, we are told how she tries to hide her eggs, but they are always found and taken away. The accompanying illustration (figure. 3) to this shows us a young boy (presumably the farmer's son) finding Jemima's eggs while the farmer's wife watches on. There is something unsettling about this illustration, as Jemima is shown unclothed in her natural form as an animal however, this seems to heighten her vulnerability and lack of power in this situation. Even in her natural state, she is denied the opportunity to do what seems to be natural to her and raise a brood.

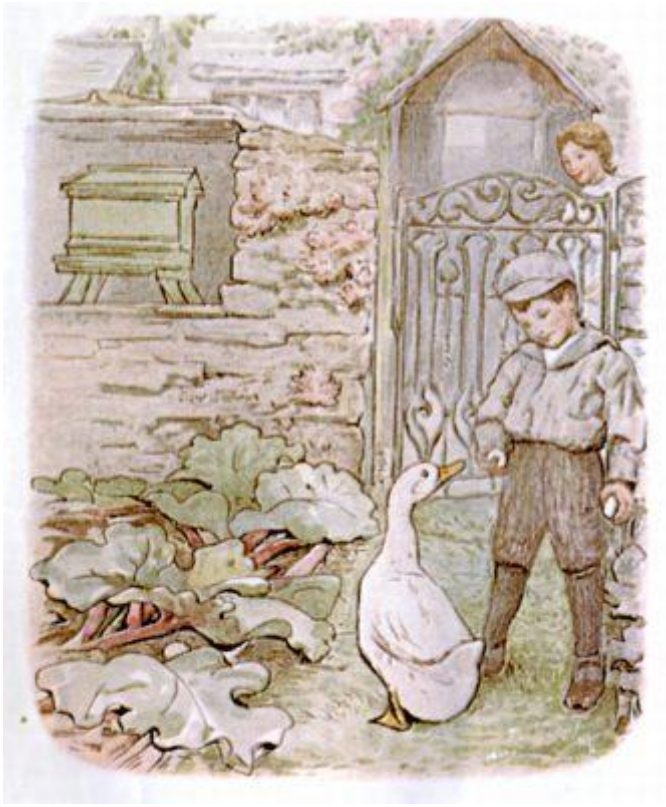

Figure. 3 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 10.

In 'A Wilderness Inside', Kutzer's comments on this illustration are worth mentioning here: 'the hierarchy of human nature and animal nature is suggested by the inclusion of the farmer's wife and son […] the mother has been allowed to raise her human child, yet looks on approvingly as he deprives Jemima of her own children'.[11] Whilst Kutzer uses this image to present the argument that

[11] Kutzer, p.205.

the presence of the two human characters highlights the hierarchal nature of the animal and human world, I would push this one step further, and suggest that the humans are representative of the Victorian society as a whole.

The farmer's wife could be seen as a metaphor, embodying the restrictive nature of Victorian society, ensuring that the duties of women are done in a certain way, including motherhood. She prevents Jemima from hatching her own eggs, perhaps because she does not trust her to raise a family in accordance with the values she/society prefers as she looks on disapprovingly – she ultimately has the power to control what happens within her yard/society. If we are to accept the farmer's wife as a representation of Victorian society then it is interesting that Potter choses to portray this character as a female and not the farmer himself (presumably a male). This adds another layer to my discussions around the representations of female friendships and lack of support network in the previous chapter. By using a female character as a symbol of restriction, Potter is only further highlighting this inherent lack of support between females in society at the time. It is not a case of simply not supporting peers, but metaphorically standing in the way of their development as women. Jemima's sister in law, Rebeccah Puddle-duck is again another female character who is unsupportive of her dreams to hatch her own eggs, declaring 'you would let them go cold, you know you would!' (p.8). Her comments are cutting, she is not supported by society, and she is not supported by her friends. This does not deter Jemima though;" I wish to hatch my own eggs; I will hatch them all by myself" (p.8) she responds, and when hiding her eggs does not suffice, she decides to leave the farmyard all together.

Jemima Puddle-Duck is often cited as a naive character – she is naïve for believing she is ready to be a mother, naïve for trusting the fox and even Potter refers to her as a 'simpleton' (p.39) But she has enough maternal instinct and instinct as a duck to make a nest of her own. As Kutzer writes in 'A Wilderness Inside*':*

> Jemima's stupidity is not altogether her own fault. She is, after all, a domesticated duck in a wild setting. All of her wild instincts about foxes and their predatory natures have been dulled by her breeding and her years in the farmyard. She seems ill-suited to farmyard life because

her wild nesting instincts interfere with animal husbandry, but she is even less suited to life in the wild.[12]

It is her domesticity that causes her naivety, as she is kept away from what is natural for her. Her time spent in the farmyard has somewhat quashed her natural instincts. This is shown in contrast to some of the other animal characters Potter presents us with, notably the two fox hound puppies who arrive with Kep the farmyard dog to save Jemima. The puppies are not named, are not clothed and act in the way dogs would naturally. They do not talk but make 'most awful noises – barking, baying, growls and howls, squealing and groans' (p.51). After scaring the fox away and rescuing Jemima, Kep, a domesticated pet controls his natural instincts, however the puppies 'rushed in and gobbled up all the eggs before he could stop them' (p.52). Despite her efforts, in the end Jemima's maternal instincts are no match for the animal instincts of the fox and the farmyard dog who have been allowed the freedom of the wild.

The tale has a bittersweet ending, as we learn that later in the year Jemima is allowed to hatch her own eggs within the confines of the farmyard, but only four of them survive. Jemima has been traumatised by her ordeal with the fox but is still able to be the mother she has always wanted to be. However, we are left with the resounding sense that Jemima's role of mother is restricted by her life in the farmyard. She was not able to raise her offspring in the wild, in a way that should be natural to her. If we are to take the restrictions of the farmyard as a metaphor for that of Victorian society, we are left with the sense that even the female characters who try to break free from this are held back by the effects of their former restraints, or at least can never fully break free. In a time where women were gaining more power society, Potter seems to be suggesting that the women who step outside the restrictions imposed on them by society are akin to domesticated animals in the wild.

When Potter has jumped through the narrative to make judgement on the restrictive nature some of her other female characters like we have seen with Mrs Tabitha Twitchit in *The Tale of Tom Kitten*, it is curious that she does the same with Jemima who is far from restrictive. Potter declares Jemima a 'simpleton' for trusting the fox. She is certainly more care free in her actions and decisions

[12] Kutzer, p. 206.

than Tabitha. But it is surely a consequence of her domesticated and sheltered life which has led her to be wrongly trusting of the foxy gentleman. As a modern-day reader, we may be forgiving of this, but Potter certainly is not. After the trauma of the fox hound puppies eating her eggs, Potter hardly ends on an uplifting note. Jemima is able to hatch her own eggs, but not all survive and Potter's final comments are particularly judgemental, 'Jemima Puddle-duck said that it was because of her nerves; but she had always been a bad sitter' (p.57). Potter disagrees with Jemima's excuse and directly blames her for her unhatched eggs. It seems Potter makes judgement on both her characters that are too restrictive and her characters who are not restrictive enough. There doesn't seem to be a happy medium in Potter's tales and it seems none of her mother characters are free from judgement. This being said, Potter does offer us an alternative representation of female characters in regard to motherhood in the character of Rebeccah Puddle-duck. Hidden within *The Tale of Jemima-Puddle-Duck* is a short and simple sentence with a big idea. In response to her sister-in-law's desire to flee the farmyard and raise her own children, Rebeccah-Puddle-duck declares 'I have not the patience to sit on a nest for twenty-eight days'. Potter notes that in fact Rebeccah 'was perfectly willing to leave the hatching to someone else' (p.8). Given that Potter is quick to make judgements on the parental techniques of her mother characters, it is interesting to see her create a character who clearly does not want to have children and chooses to opt out of parenthood. This would certainly have been a radical view to hold at the time that Potter was writing – and whilst relatively little space is used to explore this theme, Potter still does take the time to include this view point. As noted before, Potter's stories were short, and her sentences carefully and concisely constructed but her brevity is not down to lack of things to say. The fact that Potter starts this tale with the instruction to 'listen' highlights even further the importance of her words. It is a hidden opinion, but it is most certainly there and unmissable if one is to really listen.

Potter herself did not have any children and the decision not to have children would certainly have been an unusual one. Not only does Rebeccah Puddle-duck freely and openly admit she would not have the patience to be a mother, she is in fact willing to opt out of it all together, happy to leave someone else to hatch her eggs. She is certainly not afraid to voice this opinion, going on to suggest that Jemima is similar to her; 'and no more would you' she declares, adding 'you would let them go

cold, you know you would' (p.8). This is a bold statement from Rebeccah who tries to persuade her sister in law that she should not try to hatch her own eggs, as she is not fit to do so. Potter not only uses her narration to judge her characters, but it seems she has created Rebeccah to act as conduit for Potter's voice, another angle for our narrator to channel her thoughts on parenthood.

Potter has created quite a collection of differing mother roles within her works. Potter was certainly ahead of her time in this regard. However, if we are to focus more on the animal characteristics of these characters, it is clear that Potter has chosen to use ducks to present this idea for a reason. In the wild, ducks have interesting mating and breeding patterns. An egg will only hatch if it has been fertilised by a drake (male duck) and has been kept warm by the mother sitting on it, known as brooding. Some research shows that there is a 'darker side' to the mating rituals of ducks and that many female ducks in fact do not want to have their eggs fertilised. The duck penis is 'corkscrew-like', and spirals anti-clockwise which allows it to 'hook into the female's reproductive tract' during a 'forced copulation'.[13] Disturbing as this is, it is interesting that Potter alludes to this representation of reproduction in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck* in her decision to include Rebeccah Puddle-duck in the narrative. On some level Potter could be alluding to a decision not to have children as being based on the desire to have control over one's body,despite what society dictates it should be used for.

In creating the character of Rebeccah Puddle-duck, Potter has created another boundary that Jemima must traverse in order to do what she truly dreams of. Jemima is repressed both by her physical environment (the farm yard), the social norms of Victorian society (through the metaphor of the farmer's wife) and through the views of her peers and family (by Rebeccah). Potter really does make it difficult for Jemima to play the role of mother, but she created a tenacious character who wasn't about to let the boundaries of her society stand in her way.

This imagery of a female character flying away from the confines of her society brings to mind similar images from Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. The famous 'I am no bird and no net ensnares me' speech from Jane reminds me of the tenacity of Jemima. Despite the attempts of those

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[13] Richard O. Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World - and U*s (New York: Doubleday Books, 2017), p. 141.

around her to restrict and limit the freedom of the two female characters, they are both strong willed and flee the boundaries their society has imposed on them. For Jane the net is Thornfield and the marriage to Rochester and for Jemima it is the farmyard and the ability to raise her own children. However, the metaphor of the net is ultimately cut from the same cloth, they are both in effect defying the constraints of their society. This being said there is one obvious difference: Jemima Puddle-duck is actually a bird whereas for Jane her bird-like qualities are simply anthropomorphism. As a domesticated animal and try as she might, Jemima has little choice in her freedom as a parent or otherwise. She is ultimately captured and brought back to the farmyard, Jane however has free will, and returns to her net willingly. This is not a choice offered to Jemima who must return to domesticity against her wishes. Potter's decision to create Jemima as a duck – an animal with the ability of flight – grants the character a certain amount of freedom. However, the fact she is a farm yard animal restricts her in a way that a wild animal is not. She may have the same motherhood instincts as a human woman which can be controlled by society in the same way, however the very fact that she is a domesticated animal restricts her too. If we are to apply the metaphor of domesticated animals in the wild to the women who pushed back and defied the boundaries imposed on them by society – it is tempting to suggest that Potter is using *The Tale of Jemima Puddle Duck* to comment on so much more than just motherhood. Particularly as, as I have already discussed, it is clear that Potter intends her reader to really listen to this tale and take all that we can from it.

Returning to the idea of domesticated animals in the wild as a metaphor for women who began to push back on the restrictions on females in Victorian society, what could Potter be suggesting? The children who are victim to their parent's attempts to humanise them and therefore domesticate them often manage to escape these restrictions to a certain extent. Tom Kitten, Moppet and Mittens remove their clothing and play in the garden; Peter Rabbit undoes his button and loses his jacket and shoes. These characters are still (but only just) managing to escape the restrictions posed on them by their mothers, understanding that it is not natural behaviour. However, as they grow older, and as we see with Peter Rabbit, it will become more difficult for them to disregard these boundaries and they will willingly put on their clothes of restriction and remain within the confines of their society. I think Potter is criticising the actions of women, her peers and family who continued to

impose the rules and restrictions of the societal norms on their children without even attempting to flee and break free as Jemima Puddle-duck does. Whether it is out of desire or obligation, the belief that one must conform to a certain idea of femininity pushes them further away from their ability to be a good parent.

My final discussion point around Jemima Puddle-duck is in relation to a trait of ducks in real life. Farmyard birds can at times become broody and attempt to sit on eggs that have not been fertilised. Jemima is not given a title in the story, so we are unsure of her marital status. However, given that Tabitha Twitchit, old Mrs Rabbit and even Rebeccah Puddle-duck are referred to as 'Mrs' we could safely assume that Jemima is unmarried. It could therefore be possible that in Jemima, Potter is presenting us with the idea of a broody, single female. A modern-day reading of this tale could simply be of a woman who does not find a mate the traditional way and choses to take matters into her own hands by finding an alternative route to motherhood. Jemima's decision to leave the farmyard and therefore society's restrictions around motherhood are not so different from a woman nowadays choosing to have children by herself and without finding a mate to do so.

We could never know whether this is actually the case with Jemima, as the foxhound puppies eat the eggs she lays in the foxy gentleman's shed. However, we know that Potter kept ducks herself and in choosing to create Jemima as a duck, she is deliberately although subtly, showing us the many models of motherhood present in nature. It would not have been easy or looked upon favourably for a woman in Victorian society to embark on the adventure of motherhood as a single woman. But if we are to see Jemima as a representative of a single broody female, then Potter really has shown us a broad spectrum of the many ways in which motherhood can take its form in society.

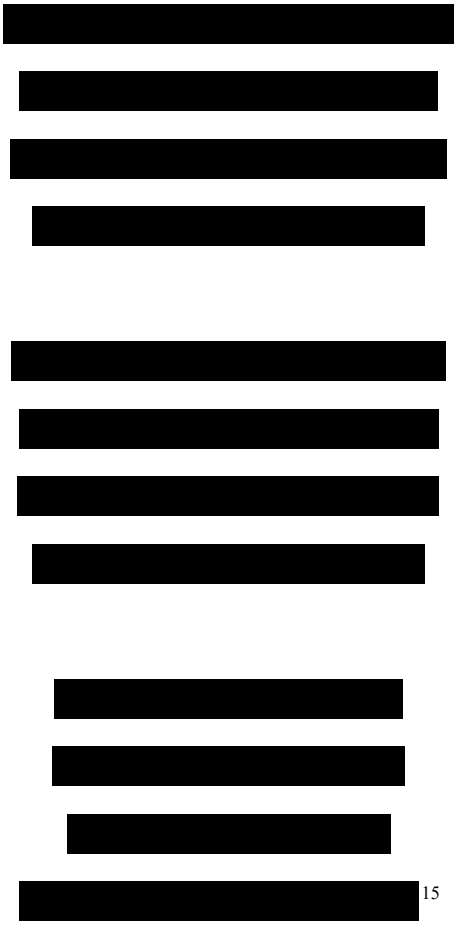
When exploring the various presentations of motherhood shown in Potter's works, it would be foolish to ignore the impact of her personal life on her writing. Whilst she was culturally and intellectually stimulated, vast swathes of Potter's childhood were spent indoors with little more than her governess and her pets (who would later inspire her writing) for company. Her relationship with her mother was not a good one and she was restricted in many of the ways her characters were. It would not be unfounded to suggest that her own Victorian restrictive childhood influenced the way she wrote about parenthood and specifically motherhood in her tales. Potter herself was somewhat a

radical character, building her own fortune, showing a keen interest in business, science, botany and literature. She was a strong woman whose natural instincts were oftentimes quashed by the restrictive expectations of her parents on her as a woman. This is likely why she becomes judgemental in her narration in regards to the actions of the mother figures and is more sympathetic towards her child characters than her adult characters.

As with all her tales, in her creation of an animal world, Potter is able to create a layer of distance between the reader and the characters in her tales. By portraying her characters as animals, she is able to somewhat detach what she is writing in her children's tales from what she was ultimately saying about the society she was living in. The fact that Potter is creating her female characters as animals means she has the freedom to pick appropriate animals for the characters depending on their defining features as an animal. A character fleeing societal constraints of course has to be a bird to fly away, a character obsessed with the image she portrays is a cat, defined by her feline femininity. However, it is clear that she is using these animal characters to say what perhaps she could not say so explicitly if the characters were human. She is able to cleverly use the enforced humanisation of the child characters to symbolise the restrictions imposed on both children in Victorian society as well as women with children. The pressure to conform to an ideal of femininity, in Potter's opinion was at the detriment to an ideal of motherhood. Her use of clothing as a symbol for restriction and the root of unnatural behaviour could be seen as a comment on parenting techniques that seemed unnatural to Potter. The clothing at times puts the child characters in physical danger, which could be highlighting a broader feeling towards the dangers of such restrictive parenting in this era.

It is not only the dangers of restrictive parenting on children that Potter presents to us in her tales, but also the dangers of the restrictions imposed on women in society (whether parents or not) to portray a certain ideal of femininity which includes motherhood. The pressure to extend the performance of an ideal of femininity into motherhood and therefore across generations is something which Potter portrays to us as potentially dangerous both to the children and to the mothers themselves. Mrs Tabitha Twitchit is tormented by her belief that her children should play a part in the image of herself she wishes to portray outwards and we are constantly told of the way her 'nerves'

affect her. This surely must be a consequence of this undue pressure. Jemima too, is a victim of her nerves after failing to hatch eggs as she wished too. Her 'nerves' are said to be the cause of several of her eggs not hatching at the end of the tale. The pressure to perform as a mother is ultimately affecting the mental health of these characters and begins to affect their children. Peter is left with an 'almost obliterated personality'[14] and Tom Kitten will later be haunted by the lasting effects of his kidnapping at the hands of Samuel Whiskers. It is clear that Potter has strong views on parenting; how it should be done and how it can ultimately affect children. As a modern-day reader, I am reminded of Philip Larkin's celebrated poem 'This Be The Verse', which is worth quoting in full:



[15]

Written in 1971, 'This Be The Verse' is so often quoted to relay what feels like an almost universal sentiment with regards to human relationships between child and parent. The lines 'but they were

[14] Kutzer, p.211
[15] Philip Larkin, 'This Be The Verse' in *Phillip Larkin Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) p.142

fucked up in their turn/ By fools in old-style hats and coats' is particularly poignant when looking at this in relation to Potter's portrayal of parenthood. Written 28 years after her death, it seems this poem almost acts as proof of what Potter was saying years before about the dangers of restrictive parenting in the Victorian era and the impact this can and did have on generations after.

Chapter 3

The Shopkeeper: The role of labour

Beatrix Potter's female characters take on many roles throughout her tales. Much of the time there is an element of performance to these roles, suggesting characters are simply conforming to societal ideals of womanhood (including motherhood and formation of female friendships) rather than actually embodying them. The area which seems to demand the least amount of performing, however, seems to be the labour roles which these female characters adopt. The tasks and work that they undertake are very much a part of who the characters are and, in some instances, these roles inform the narratives around their stories. There is no performance here.

There is a noticeable difference in Potter's attitude towards women in the sphere of work versus women conforming to an ideal of femininity that incudes formation of female friendships and maternal behaviours. The tone is much more positive, more encouraging and more lively denoting a clear sense of delight and success for the characters in this side of themselves. This being said, she is not particularly radical in this space as much of the labour tasks her female characters fulfil are typically those associated with women – washing, cleaning, ironing and homemaking. What is interesting, is that Potter allows her characters to take advantage of this and control the way they offer and deploy their skills in a way that ultimately brings them success.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways Potter portrays traditionally gender-specific tasks in relation to both male and female characters. I will argue that she portrays labour roles such as cleaning, washing and homemaking in a way which allows her characters to exploit these traditionally female specific tasks to their advantage. I will introduce discussion around some new faces including Mrs Tiggy-winkle, Mrs Tittlemouse and notably Kitty, the title character in *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots* published in 2016. Given its recent publication, comparatively little has been written about *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots*. It is Potter's reimagining of the folk tale *Puss in Boots,* but her choice to replace the male character with a female character dressed in male clothing makes for interesting discussion on the way she subverts gender specific tasks. Ultimately, whether it be through using their skill for

profit, reputation or to keep their space safe, what these characters have in common is the way they exploit gender related labour tasks to control their environments and their sense of self.

Leading on from this, I will also discuss the ways that entrepreneurship plays an unequivocally important role in Potter's characterisation of her female characters. A business minded woman herself, it is clear through a close reading of her tales that this is something she was passionate about. Her writing reflects a period in time where 'women were an active and important part of British economy'. At the turn of the century, approximately 6% of business owners were female.[1] Whilst this is low, Potter still reflects this in her writing as she shines a positive light on the characters who own their own businesses showcasing the ever-increasing importance of enterprising females in British economy. Her approach to the representation of females in business is significantly different from the way she approaches the previous themes I have discussed. Her negative predisposition towards female friendships and motherhood and her tendency to highlight their importance by omission is not something we see in relation to female entrepreneurship. Where she has been negative, she is positive, where she has been judgemental she is supportive, and where she has used bad examples to highlight the lack of beneficial ones, she includes a myriad variations of positive representations.

To explore the roles of entrepreneurship in female characters, I revisit characters I have discussed in the previous two chapters; Mrs Tabitha Twitchit and old Mrs Rabbit. This will not only provide an interesting insight into the multifaceted nature of Potter's characters, but it will help emphasise my argument that Potter's oeuvre must be considered as whole to truly understand the underlying messages of her work. I also use these characters' narratives to highlight the comparative difference between the ways they carry out labour related tasks as opposed to friendships and mothering. As way of comparison, I will spend some time discussing the way male labour roles are depicted within Potter's writing, focusing specifically on the rather minor character of John Joiner in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers.* I will argue that in Potter's creation of a male character whose name includes his occupation, excludes him from any opportunity to showcase a multi-faceted personality

[1] Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino, 'Risk, success, and failure: female entrepreneurship in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *The Economic History Review*, 70, 3 (2017) 837-858 (p.837).

in the way that female characters are. Finally, I will look at how Potter deals with authoritative figures in her tales represented by 'a doll dressed as policeman' and an easily distracted magpie doctor.

'Mrs Tittlemouse was a most terribly tidy particular little mouse, always sweeping and dusting the soft sandy floors': Skill and control of space with Mrs Tittlemouse

Written in 1910, *The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse* tells the story of Mrs Tittlemouse, a woodmouse who endeavours to keep her underground home clean, tidy and most importantly free of unwanted visitors. The labour role most attributed to our title character is cleaning. Indeed she is often cited as being obsessive over her cleaning[2] as the tale ends with her embarking on 'a spring cleaning which lasted a fortnight'.[3] As a small delicate little mouse, dressed in a pink apron, Mrs Tittlemouse seems the perfect character to embody such a typical feminine trait as an obsession with cleaning her home. She at once could seem quiet, a pushover, dutifully cleaning after the uninvited guests invade her home but I would argue that Potter gives quite a power to such a small and seemingly innocuous character. She gives her the strength and the power to use her typically feminine trait to her advantage as she shows how she effectively uses it to control her environment.

Cleaning plays a part in the lives of many of Potter's female characters. It is an essential part of the performance which I have argued many of the characters undertake. Whether it be part of their performance as a mother or as a friend, it is always used as a tool to conform to an ideal of femininity. It ensures that their home is reflective of the image they would like to project, when they cannot control those who inhabit their space, at least they can control the space itself. The creation of Mrs Tittlemouse whose sole purpose seems to be to clean could therefore seem quite reductive when we look at her in comparison to other female characters. However, it is the way she executes this task of cleaning which separates her from a character who cleans their environment as a *performance for others* and a character who cleans in order *to control others*.

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[2] Stuart Jeffries, 'The Ugly Truth about Peter Rabbit', *The Guardian,* (2006) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/dec/07/booksforchildrenandteenagers> [accessed 9 August 2018].
[3] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Mrs Tittlemouse* (London: Frederick Warne, 1910), p. 55.

In this tale, Mrs Tittlemouse literally cleans unwanted attention from her house. We follow her through the 'yards and yards of sandy passages' as she attempts to clean her home but is constantly discovering uninvited guests lurking around the corner. She banishes beetles, ladybirds and a spider who she 'bundled out a winder' after it leaves 'cobweb all over [her] nice clean house' (p.16). She happens upon Babbity Bumble the bee and 'wished she had a broom' (p.21) to expel him from her house. Finally, and most imposing, Mr Jackson, a toad with a 'fat voice' (p.28) manages to enter her home uninvited. It is Mr Jackson who causes the most problems for Mrs Tittlemouse, no broom or bundling will force him out. She is forced to host Mr Jackson, offering him various plates of food which he rejects in favour of a taste of honey; 'that is why I came to call' he says. Unsatisfied, he eventually finds Babbity Bumble and accosts him for his honey. No amount of cleaning will save Mrs Tittlemouse now as we are told 'she shut herself up in the nut cellar while Mr Jackson pulled out the bees-nest (p.48). When she reappears and the two offending visitors have left 'the untidiness is something dreadful'. This is the final straw for Mrs Tittlemouse, she must exercise some control to keep her home her own and resolves to do this in the only way she knows – cleaning. We are told how she 'gathered up the moss and the remains of the beeswax' all the remnants of the visitors which must be tidied and cleaned away, and 'fetched some twigs to partly close up the front door' (p.48). She literally cleans away the visitors and to ensure they cannot enter again, gaining control over her space. As Daphne Kutzer writes in 'A Wilderness Inside', Mrs Tittlemouse creates a 'self-defined living space that suits oneself and is not defined by others'.[4] This also means that she does not have to perform in a space which is hers. When Mr Jackson is demanding honey, Mrs Tittlemouse could have found some for him and I have no doubt that characters such as Mrs Tabitha Twitchit would have done this had it been someone she was entertaining. But it is not about performance for Mrs Tittlemouse, it is about control. This is highlighted by the ending of the tale. Potter shows us Mrs Tittlemouse throwing a party to 'five other little mice' (p.54). Mr Jackson cannot fit through the door however, he can watch from the window and is 'not at all offended. (p.57). Mrs Tittlemouse uses her skills and arguably her obsession over cleaning to control her environment. She is not performing –

[4] Daphne Kutzer, 'A Wilderness Inside: Domestic Space in the Work of Beatrix Potter', *The Lion and the Unicorn*, 21, 2, 204- 214 (1997) p. 211.

she is not pretending to be comfortable in a space she is not comfortable in and this gains her the respect of Mr Jackson.

"My name is Mrs Tiggy-winkle […] I'm an excellent clear-starcher!": Skill and pride with Mrs Tiggy-winkle

Mrs Tittlemouse is not the only of Potter's characters who uses a typically feminine labour task to her advantage. *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* written in 1905 tells the story of a young girl named Lucie who spends a day with Mrs Tiggy-winkle, a hedgehog washerwoman. We learn that Mrs Tiggy-winkle does the washing and ironing of many of Potter's characters. She darns a 'pair of stockings belonging to Sally Henny-Penny'[5], washes a handkerchief for old Mrs Rabbit and drops off clean clothing for Benjamin Bunny and Peter Rabbit.

Similar to the case with Mrs Tittlemouse, we could be tempted to criticize Potter for her creation of a female character whose sole purpose is to clean the clothes of other people. But it is the fact that Mrs Tiggy-winkle cleans clothes for others which makes this character interesting. She claims herself that she is an 'excellent clear-starcher' (p.23), so she clearly has confidence in her ability. She seems to take great pride in telling Lucie about all the work she does for her customers and involving her in her tasks for the day. It is rarity for Potter to have a female character make a statement about their competency at something. As we have seen in previous chapters, Potter often seems to highlight things her characters are not good at rather than areas that they are. Where other characters have been self-deprecating, Mrs Tiggy-winkle displays attributes quite the opposite to this. She understands her trade and is happy to share her expertise with Lucie. Again there seems to be little performance here.

All this said, there is an element of this tale which is slightly problematic. Throughout the narrative, Lucy who is a human young girl does not realise that Mrs Tiggy-winkle is a hedgehog. She does notice strange things about Mrs Tiggy-winkle such as the prickles on her head which Lucie presumes to be 'hair-pins sticking wrong end out' (p.44). It is only at the end of the tale when Lucy

[5] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle* (London, Frederick Warne, 1905), p. 32.

turns to say goodbye that she sees Mrs Tiggy-winkle for who (or what) she is, 'why! Mrs Tiggy-winkle was nothing but a hedgehog' (p.57). The fact that Lucie does not see her as an animal, and just as a washerwoman does present some problems here. Her inability to distinguish her from a human – suggests that there is an element of the performance to Mrs Tiggy-winkle's behaviour. From Lucie's point of view – a young girl – she is simply a woman washing clothes, she does not see that she is in fact a hedgehog washing clothes. In conflating Mrs Tiggy-winkle with other women she must know – it could be argued that Mrs Tiggy-winkle is performing in order to fit in with other images of women that someone like Lucie would understand. However, Potter clears up any confusion at the end of the tale 'I have seen that door into the back of the hill called Cat Bells – and besides I am very well acquainted with dear Mrs Tiggy-winkle! (p.57). Potter's decision to make a comment from her point of view reassures the reader that the magic is real, and that a washerwoman hedgehog named Mrs Tiggy-winkle does exist. Potter's position as an adult and as the author and therefore controller of the story, confirms that Lucie's interaction with Mrs Tiggy-winkle did happen. It is this interaction from Potter with her audience which confirms that this is reality and there is no room for performance.

'She earned her living by knitting rabbit-wool mittens and muffetees (I once bought a pair at a bazaar)': Provision and preparation with old Mrs Rabbit

It is not only a confirmation of reality that Potter offers when she allows her narrative voice to comment on her tales – she uses it to offer her acceptance and support of her character's actions too. Potter uses this tool throughout her stories, offering her opinion on the situation she has written about. What is interesting however, is how and when she chooses to do this. In my previous two chapters, I have shown examples of where Potter does this to make judgement on her characters – commenting on their inability to do something correctly or referring to her characters in a negative light; Jemima is 'simpleton', Tabitha Twitchit makes 'unwise' decisions. This is in relation to the issues around mothering or parenting – however around the theme of working women – Potter chooses to use her voice to support her characters and paint them in a positive light.

The Tale of Benjamin Bunny (1904), tells the story of cousins Benjamin and Peter retrieving Peter's clothes which he lost in Mr McGregor's' garden (the famous escapade of *The Tale of Peter*

Rabbit). Whilst she is on the periphery of the story, old Mrs Rabbit is an important character to pay attention to. We are told 'old Mrs Rabbit was a widow; she earned her living by knitting rabbit-wool mittens and muffetees'.[6] Whilst this is something which is written in introduction to the tale, as is often the case, the illustrations to the story add another layer of significance of this statement.

The first image (figure. 1) we see in this tale is not of Benjamin Bunny or of his more famous cousin Peter. It is a drawing of old Mrs Rabbit in her burrow, knitting, with three unnamed unclothed (and therefore undistinguishable) children at her side. Look closely at the image and there is the depiction of a fourth bunny, though only an ear is visible. Who is this and why does Potter choose to show only a small part of them? I will come back to this. On the wall are bunches of what we will learn is 'rabbit tobacco (which is what *we* call lavender)' (p.11).

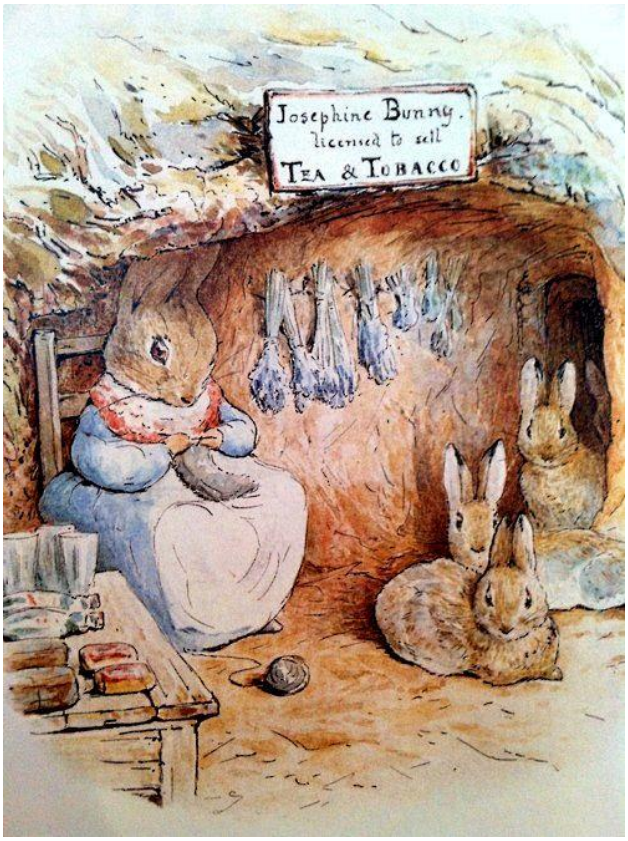

Figure 1 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* (London: Frederick Warne, 1904) p. 2.

[6]Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* (London: Frederick Warne, 1904) p. 11.

Potter highlights the fact that Mrs Rabbit owns the business which she works for in her drawings without being explicit in the text. There is subtlety in this, but it was clearly important for Potter to include. The sign above old Mrs Rabbit's doorway reads 'Josephine Bunny, licenced to sell tea and tobacco'. If we are to look into the role of female entrepreneurship at the time, it becomes apparent that Potter is depicting something which was both economically and culturally relevant in this tale and in fact arguably in this image alone. In 'Risk, Success and Failure: female entrepreneurship in late Victorian and Edwardian England', Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino write that women were becoming increasingly confident in their ability as entrepreneurs and business owners as they were 'advertising their enterprises with confidence and using their own names in trade directories.' It is interesting that this is something that we can see in Potter's stories for children as old Mrs Rabbit has her name clearly etched into the sign for her business. She is confident, she is proud to put her name to her business and it seems that this was something which was important for Potter to include here. We are not told the circumstance behind the opening of Mrs Rabbit's shop, but we can assume that it is in the wake of her husband's death. Like Miss Matty in Gaskell's *Cranford*, she is licensed to sell tea, but she is also licensed to sell tobacco. This may seem odd as this would have been a typically masculine sector. Due to the 'change in inheritance policies that did not discriminate against widows… resulting in women's engagement in a wide variety of trades'[7] we could assume that old Mrs Rabbit has simply taken on her husband's business. Either way, it is clear that Potter wants to show us an example of a female who is succeeding in the aftermath of her husband's death.

Going back to the depiction of the fourth child bunny lurking in the passage behind the three bunnies in the foreground, I think it is fair to assume that this is meant to be Peter Rabbit. But it is interesting that the adventurous boy rabbit in his famous blue jacket has blurred into the background here. There is a clear indication that Mrs Rabbit not only chooses to involve her three daughters in her business but deliberately excludes her son from this all together. In subsequent images, the three daughters Flopsy Mopsy and Cotton-tail are helping Mrs Rabbit with her work. They are shown at the table where she is sorting through items to be sold via her business. It may at first seem slightly sexist

[7] Aston and Di Martino, p.840.

for Mrs Rabbit to keep her daughters at home helping her with chores while their disobedient brother is free to have adventures with his cousin. However, Mrs Rabbit's involvement of her children in her business could indeed be seen as a favourable act towards them. Indeed, Jane Lewis has argued that 'parents wanted their daughters to be prepared for some sort of occupation'.[8]As we know from previous tales, and as Potter reiterates in this tale, old Mrs Rabbit is a widow and she is left as the sole breadwinner to provide for her family. When Mrs Rabbit could be encouraging her daughters to socialise and form female friendships to help put them on the journey towards marriage (as I discuss in chapter one) she instead encourages them in business, perhaps knowing all too well what can happen if you focus on gaining friendships rather than skills, particularly if you are to find yourself widowed in later life. As we have seen in other stories, female friendships between older women seem full of negativity and lacking in support. Regardless of whether a woman had been involved in her husband's business or not, widows were 'perceived as less reliable than their husbands'[9] in business. Friendships would not support a woman, but the confidence and skills to own and run a business would.

In this tale, Potter chooses to transcend the boundary of fact and fantasy and make comment on Mrs Rabbit's business. She states 'I once bought a pair [of mittens] at a bazaar' (p.11). As the author of this book she chooses to include a small but nonetheless significant sentence that affirms Potter's support of Mrs Rabbit and therefore by extension female independent business owners. When she has used this device to make negative criticism of her female characters, here she uses it to offer support and praise them for their work. This perhaps would seem to be a priority for Potter. She is offering up a supportive female voice to the work of the character which is something she experienced herself.

There is also something to be said about the way in which Potter structures this story, that adds another element to the way she is highlighting the importance of female entrepreneurship in her works. In fact, if we look at the story from another angle, we could say that it is actually not *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* it all – it is the tale of old Mrs Rabbit. As noted earlier, the tale begins with an

[8] Lewis, p. 177.
[9] Aston and Di Martino, p.856.

image of old Mrs Rabbit alongside Flopsy Mopsy and Cotton-Tail (and presumably Peter in the background). The character which this tale assumes to be about – Benjamin Bunny – is nowhere to be found. The final image is also of old Mrs Rabbit and her business. She is shown in her chair sitting underneath the rabbit-tobacco and herbs which she has spent the day preparing. The final lines of the text read: 'old Mrs Rabbit strung up the onions and hung them from the kitchen ceiling, with the bunches of herbs and rabbit tobacco' (p.57). This tale begins and ends with old Mrs Rabbit and her business, the story in between is almost just filler, it is mothering, it is friendship but it is nowhere near as important as her need to provide for her brood.

Potter is highlighting a belief that work is one of the more important aspects of womanhood. By beginning and ending *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* with Mrs Rabbit who is the embodiment of strength and independence, Potter highlights the significance of such attributes. It is subtle but it is still there. This is exactly what Bruno Bettelheim talks about in *Uses of Enchantment* when he writes that fairy tales 'convey at the same time overt and covert meanings […] to speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult'.[10] By using her authoritative position of author, Potter is able to make comments which seem factual rather than fantasy, it not only adds a layer of the fantastical to the child reader, but offers an opinion for adult or parent readers to think about too.

'Moppet and Mittens have grown up into very good rat-catchers': Skill and capital gain with Moppet and Mittens

It is not just in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* that Potter plays with the roles of young females in business in comparison to their brothers; we can see this in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* as well. Similar to the emphasis in *Benjamin Bunny*, Potter only lends a few sentences to this point, but it is still clear nevertheless. After Tom Kitten's kidnapping by Samuel Whiskers and subsequent saving by John Joiner (whom I will discuss later), Potter makes comment on the future skills and abilities of Tom and his sisters Moppet and Mittens. Not only does she note that 'Moppet and Mitten have grown

[10] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1976), p. 5.

up into very good rat-catchers', they are so good that they use their ability to 'find plenty of employment'.[11] She goes on 'they charge so much a dozen and earn their living very comfortably. They hang up the rats' tails in a row on the barn door, to show many they have caught – dozens and dozens of them.' (p.74). There are a few things to dissect here. Firstly, the cats are clearly very good at what they do and are able to capitalize on this in the village – selling their catch as food to its residents. Whilst they are not as explicit as Josephine Bunny in their confidence, i.e. putting their names in their business, they are clearly not afraid to show to the village what they are doing. Potter's repetition of the word 'dozen' (she writes it three times in the two sentences), emphasises just how successful the cats are at catching rats.

The images which illustrate this text also add to this idea. In one of the accompanying sketches (figure 2) – the cats are shown hanging the rat's trails on the door, hammer in hand (or more literally, hammer in paw). The depiction of the cats in what would normally be seen as masculine physical labour is quite refreshing.

Figure. 2 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 74.

Another of the accompanying illustrations (figure 3) shows Moppet and Mittens at work. One cat is peering over a ledge at her unwitting prey, while the other is shown in the background with rat

[11] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 72.

in her mouth. Potter takes the time to illustrate this in colour and depict two strong female characters at work. Again, this highlights how important it was for Potter to show this within her stories.

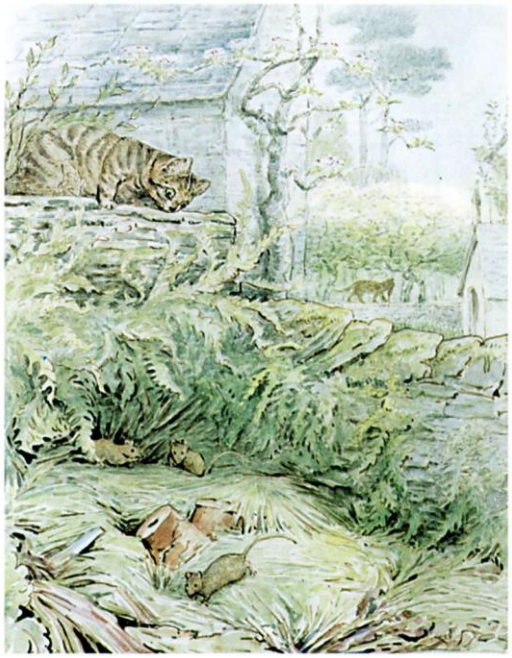

Figure. 3 Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1908), p. 73.

Tom Kitten is nowhere to be seen in this image and, similar to the case with Peter in *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*, Tom Kitten is excluded from the labour in which his sisters partake. At the end of the tale, Potter writes 'But Tom Kitten has always been afraid of rats; he never durst face anything bigger than – A mouse' (p.76). Tom has clearly been traumatised by his incident with Samuel Whiskers and this has consequences for him in adulthood. He is not as skilled as his sisters and therefore unable to play a part in their business. In 'Kittens and Kitchens: Food, Gender, and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers'*, Heather A. Evans writes 'Through this juxtaposition of the sister and brother cats, Potter scores another hit in her attack on conventional Victorian constructions of gender'. [12] This is true and Evans adds to the notion that Potter is using this scene to draw comparison between male and female ideals as she describes the cats as 'feminist felines'. However, Evans excludes the matriarch Tabitha Twitchit in this description as she also adds 'Moppet and Mittens, are so far

[12] Heather A. Evans, 'Kittens and Kitchens: Food, Gender and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*', Victorian Literature and Culture (2008), 36, 603–623, p. 604.

removed from the model of femininity figured by their mother'.[13] This does not seem entirely fair as looking elsewhere in Potter's oeuvre reveals that Tabitha too is a business owner and her daughters could be seen as simply inheriting their mother's appetite for business rather than her need to conform to an ideal of femininity. In focusing her discussion solely around *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*, Evans disregards what I believe to be fundamental in discussing Beatrix Potter's tales which is that they have to be read as collective to be truly understood.

We must also not forget that there is a significant difference between the roles that Moppet and Mittens carry out to that of either the female rabbits (Josephine Bunny and her daughters) or even that of their mother Tabitha Twitchit. Moppet and Mittens are rat-catchers, something which is natural to them in their animal lives. They are not earning a living through a human skill of knitting or retail or even washing as Mrs Tiggy-winkle does. This is particularly interesting as we see the way that male characters and in particular Tom Kitten are excluded from this. Rat catching should be a natural skill for Tom, but it was his experience with a rat as a child which means he, as Evans puts it 'exhibits a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder.' He is not good at something he should naturally be good at and in a truly animal world this would surely mean he would suffer physically. So, whilst Moppet and Mittens who have not suffered are able to naturally and more than sufficiently catch rats – what they are also able to do is pick elements of human life to help capitalise on their naturally animalistic skill. It is natural for them to catch rats, but it is not so natural for them to sell them and earn a living from them. Potter therefore not only excludes Tom from a role that he should have naturally, but also from a more human role that he could have like his sisters. Again, this highlights a juxtaposition between the capabilities of male and females in their role of work.

"I think I may say I have shown considerable spirit in bringing it out myself!"[14]: Entrepreneurship with Beatrix Potter

It is probable that Potter's support of female business owners could come from the fact she was an enterprising woman herself. She did not feel she had to feign this part of life, where perhaps

[13] Evans, p.619
[14] Linda Lear, *Beatrix Potter: A life in Nature* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 136.

she did in other attributes linked to a nineteenth century ideal of femininity. In *Over the Hills and Far Away, The Life of Beatrix Potter*, Matthew Dennison notes that 'Beatrix inherited a legacy of enterprise, bloody mindedness, philanthropy and pluck'[15] from her Grandmother which no doubt played a part in her success as an author. Her enterprising nature began at Christmas in 1889 when she created 'a series of designs for Christmas and New Year cards […] trialled on members of their family' (p.99) in order to afford the purchase of a printing press with her brother Bertram. She was encouraged by an uncle to sell her paintings more widely and eventually (after a series of rejections) 'set about publishing the book herself […] determined one way or another to see her story in print in her own preferred format' (p.123). Her decision to self-publish was costly and as Dennison notes, was a sign of 'confidence in the enterprise and her single mindedness' (p.123). This confidence in her ability again echoes back to what Aston and Di Martino observe and which we see littered throughout her writing. It wasn't just her determination to publish her stories and illustrations that made Potter so enterprising , she sought to build a merchandise around Peter Rabbit, including a Peter Rabbit Race Game (figure. 4), Peter Rabbit wallpaper and a Peter Rabbit doll which she registered the patent for herself.

[15] Matthew Dennison, *'Over the Hills and Far Away' The Life of Beatrix Potter* (London: Head of Zeus, 2016), p. 45.

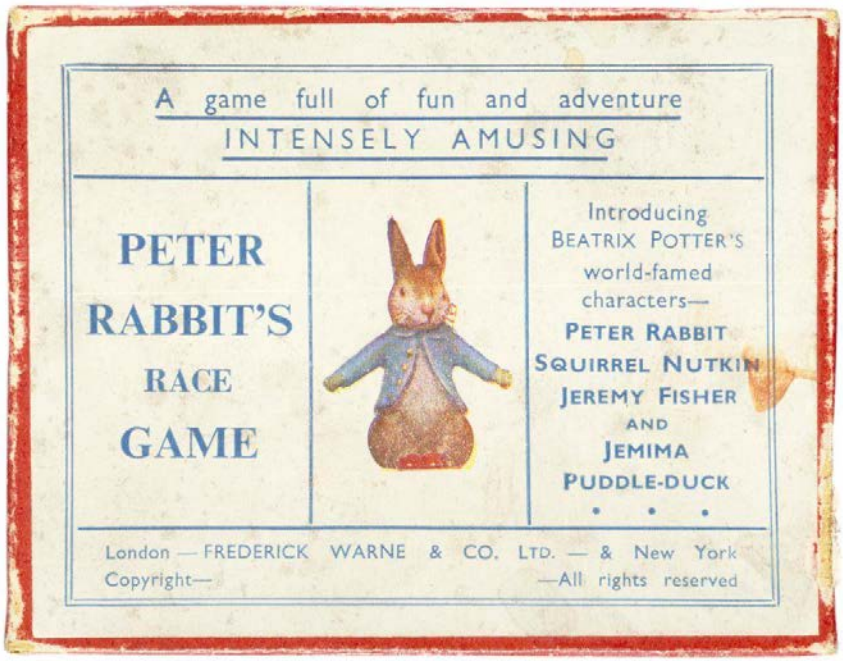

Figure. 4 Peter Rabbit's Race Game

Potter was determined to make herself a success so that 'by the end of 1903, The Tale of Peter Rabbit had sold 50,000 copies and Beatrix was a bestselling author with an income of her own (p.171). Taking all of this into consideration, it is evident that her enterprising nature and determined spirit has crept into the characterisation of her female characters. They struggle with the performance of the 'angel of the house', but they do not struggle in business.

'Tabitha Twitchit immediately raised the price of everything a half-penny; and she continued to refuse to give credit': Savvy shop keeping with Tabitha Twitchit and Sally Henny Penny

Potter's personal experiences with business and the importance of female involvement is something she takes inspiration from in The *Tale of Ginger and Pickles*. Written in 1909, *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* tells the story of the downfall of a grocery store run by a cat and a dog (who are both male) and the subsequent effects on the villages, other shops, and new business owners. The shop in the story is loosely based on the village shop in Potter's home town of Sawrey. The shop was run by a Mrs Taylor whose husband, Potter had said 'was always in bed' and who 'thinks he may pass as a doormouse'.[16] Potter is clearly using humour here to mock the lack of involvement from Mr John

[16]Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* (London: Frederick Warne), Introduction.

Taylor in the village shop. This mocking of male characters and their work competence in relation to their female counter parts is something which Potter explores in this tale.

Potter begins the tale by giving some detail on what the shop sold and who it catered for. She writes 'it was a little small shop just the right size for Dolls […] the counter inside was a convenient height for rabbits. Ginger and Pickles sold red spotty pocket-handkerchiefs at a penny three farthings. They also sold sugar, snuff and galoshes. In fact, although it was such a small shop it sold nearly everything'.[17] The accompanying illustrations show some familiar faces in the shop – Peter Rabbit, and Flopsy, Mopsy and Cotton-tail, Samuel Whiskers, Jeremy Fisher and even Mrs Tiggy-winkle. We are told that Ginger is a cat and Pickles is a dog, but this means that 'the rabbits were always a little bit afraid of Pickles' (p.8). The shop also includes mice in its customer base, but Ginger (the cat) cannot serve them as 'it made his mouth water' (p.11). Pickles (the dog) feels the same way about rats but notes 'but it would never do to eat our customers; they would leave us and go to Tabitha Twitchit's' (p.12). We are told that Mrs Tabitha Twitchit 'kept the only other shop in the village' (p.12); however, where her shop is different to Ginger and Pickles' is that she does not give credit whereas they 'gave unlimited credit' (p.15). Potter notes that 'the customers come again and again, and buy quantities, in spite of being afraid of Ginger and Pickles'. Nothing is scarier than having to pay a bill it would seem. It is not surprising therefore that Ginger and Pickles have to close their business – giving unlimited credit means they cannot afford food for themselves, and because they cannot eat their customers – they 'were obliged to eat their own goods' (p.21). The close of Ginger and Pickles signals a step change in the way shops operate in Sawrey and it is this which is most significant in the tale.

As soon as the store closes, Potter tells us that 'Tabitha Twitchit immediately raised the price of everything a half-penny; and she continued to refuse to give credit' (p.43). We already know that Tabitha owns the only other shop in the village so it is a savvy move on the part of the enterprising cat and one Potter clearly wanted to include. Mr John Dormouse and his daughter begin to sell goods from their home but when he was complained to 'he would stay in bed, and would say nothing but

[17] Beatrix Potter, The Tale of Ginger and Pickles (London: Frederick Warne, 1909), p. 5.

"very snug" which is not the way to carry on retail business (p.50). This is a reference to the John Taylor that Potter dedicates the book to, and is a cutting remark on his work ethics and competencies as a business owner. In the end it is Sally Henny Penny who triumphs, setting up a shop with 'a remarkable assortment of bargains' (p.53). However, Potter notes that she 'gets rather flustered when she tries to count out change, and she insists on being paid cash' (p.55). It is not made explicit here, but it is suggested that regardless of Tabitha's Twitchit's business-savvy mind, she is unsuccessful in the market competition because she is a cat and we mustn't forget that some of Ginger and Pickle's customers were sometimes scared of Ginger for that very reason. Sally Henny Penny, like Tabitha refuses to give credit but 'she is quite harmless' (p.55) and so ultimately, she will succeed where Tabitha will fail.

Regardless of whether it is Tabitha Twitchit or Sally Henny Penny who is the most successful, Potter leaves us in a position whereby the two characters left who are the most competent are female. This is certainly an inspiring note to end on for her younger female readers. It is also reflective of the culture around female entrepreneurship at the time. As Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino's research suggests that 'female entrepreneurs seemed to be relatively less prone to bankruptcy than male ones.'[18] Potter does well here to mirror reality in her fiction and ensure that big cultural changes for women were translated for her child audience. She certainly manages to make this feel accessible to her readers.

To explore a little further the way Potter makes intelligent thought accessible for her young writers it is worth looking at the fact that critics have often discussed how Potter refused to write down to her audience. Her tales are littered with complex words, in *The Tale of The Flopsy Bunnies* we learn of the 'soporific' effects of lettuce, and in *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-duck* we are introduced to a 'superfluous' hen. These are certainly not words every young child would understand. In *Beatrix Potter,* Ruth Macdonald notes 'Potter is perfectly aware of her audience's limitations' but 'just because her audience was young, she would not accede to simplified vocabulary'.[19] But it is not just her choice of vocabulary that is used to ensure there is learning outside of the typical moral

[18] Aston and Di Marino, p. 847.
[19] Ruth Macdonald, *Beatrix Potter,* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 41.

lessons we would expect from children's literature. In *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles*, Potter takes the time to describe some of the intricacies of business owning and in particular shop keeping. She explains the meaning of credit, talking directly to her audience – 'now the meaning of "credit" is this – when a customer buys a bar of soap, instead of the customer pulling out a purse and paying for it – she says she will pay another time' (p.15). She goes on to say 'but there is no money in what is called the "till" (p.16). It is interesting that Potter takes such time to explain jargon and simple business terms to her child audience. It is clear that she wants them to take away learnings from the text which have more practical uses. She not only wants to paint business owning in a positive light, she wants to educate her readers about it too.

'No; I fear Miss Catherine was a born poacher': Re-claiming space with Kitty-in-Boots

The concept of excluding male characters from a multi-faceted personality is taken one step further in *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots*, where Potter not only omits a male character, she replaces him with a female. The tale was written in 1914 but, interrupted by the outbreak of the first world war, was left unfinished. Potter never completed the tale, nor the illustrations - only two were found. Illustrations in the published book are by Quentin Blake who is most famously known for his illustrations of Roald Dahl's writing. The story has received quite differing opinions from Beatrix Potter fans worldwide; some have complained that it lacks the 'charm and simplicity' of her previous tales, whilst some see it as a good addition to the collection.[20] A lot of comment has been made on the presentation of the book itself; it is A4 size, so much larger than the famously small books in her collection and the illustrations by Blake lack the mischievous detail that Potter's have. There is suggestion by readers that perhaps the reason this tale was left unpublished was because it wasn't actually finished, with many reviews suggesting it is merely an early draft and the plot remains muddled. These reviews seem fair as the story does read rather strangely, there are a great deal of characters with multiple names and numerous plot lines.

[20] The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots, Goodreads <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28773072-the-tale-of-kitty-in-boots> [accessed 26 August 2018].

The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots is loosely based on the more famous *Puss in Boots,* a fairy tale which has had many variations since its original formation. In writing *The Tale of Kitty in Boots*, Potter entered a dialogue which began in Italy in the sixteenth century, and to discuss what Potter is doing, we must begin at the origins. In fact, there is very little to discuss about this tale unless we do so. The oldest version of the story was included in *Facetious Nights of Straparola* by Giovanni Francesco Straparola in (c.1550 -53). A second version was published around 80 years later by Giabattista Basile with the title 'Cagliuso' and again in 1867 by Charles Perrault where it became 'Puss in Boots'. In Jack Zipes's *Happily Ever After*, he states:

> If we study the formative 'Puss in Boots' versions…we shall see that the narrative strategies of these authors, the transformations of motifs and characters, the different styles, and the implied historical symbolical meanings and overtones constitute a generic model of discourse that establishes the frame for the manner in which we discuss, debate, and propose standards of behaviour and norms in Western Civilization[21]

I am not suggesting that we must see *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots* as a formative version, however as it is written in 1914 it does predate other modern versions. Potter's decision to create a variation *of Puss in Boots* allows us to see her as part of a group of authors all attempting to use their feline characters to comment on issues in wider society at their time. The 'frame' that Zipes refers to, is, he argues, 'the male frame…used to rationalise the manner in which power-relations are distributed to benefit men.'[22] Potter's contribution to this is a feminist one, ensuring that a female voice is kept within this traditional folk tale, and establishes the tale within a female frame.

The plot of Potter's version of *Puss in Boots* is quite different to that of the previous three. In both the Straparola and Basile version, the feline character serves a peasant master and with their wit and knowledge helps to trick a King into allowing a poor man to marry his daughter. Whilst the plot is not the same in *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots*, there are some similarities in theme which run throughout all the tales, in particular the role of women and the role of performance. The gender of the cat was

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[21] Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children and the Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 17.
[22] Zipes, p. 38.

always female until Perrault's reworking of the tale when the character was depicted as a male and as Zipes puts it 'women are pushed to the margins of this tale – just as they are in the real world of men.'[23] By ensuring her version of the story includes a female protagonist, Potter guarantees that the frame is shifted back to the feminine but this time with a twist. The work undertaken by the cat in Straparola and Basile's versions is under the servitude of a male master. The feline female uses her cunning and wit to trick the king into allowing his daughter to marry a peasant. The female cats are almost disregarded by the masters after helping them, and there is a theme of ingratitude towards women in these versions.

The way clothing is used in all variants on the *Puss in Boots* story is particularly interesting in the way it is used to fool others. In the formative versions, the cats find suitably elegant clothing for their masters so they are able to present themselves as wealthy young men and therefore marry accordingly. As Zipes puts it, 'there is no real rational or moral basis for their success, and the only thing they must learn is how to fool other people, wear the right clothes, pretend to be what they are not and take power through force'.[24] It is the female cats who 'teach' their male masters how to do this – simple as it may sound.

Where clothing is used by the *Puss in Boots* characters to help disguise their masters, it is the cat herself who uses it as disguise in Potter's version. Kitty dresses in a 'gentleman's Norfolk jacket and little fur-lined boots' complete with an air rifle when she goes out poaching. She is said to be 'rather flattered to be mistaken for a sportsman'[25] when Mrs Tiggy-winkle refers to her as 'Sir'. Though it would be easy to discuss this point in relation to male and female identities it is perhaps more interesting to discuss this in relation to the *Puss in Boots*-style narrative as a whole. In the earlier versions of the story it is the human male peasants who are mistaken as something they are not (i.e. wealthy), whereas in Potter's version it is the animal female who is mistaken as something she is not (i.e. male). Potter allows the female cat to use her skill and abilities to her own advantage rather than that of a male character. As Zipes notes on Basile's version, 'she knows that the court is interested in

[23] Zipes, p. 32
[24] Zipes, p. 22.
[25] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots* (London: Frederick Warne, 2016), p. 28.

nothing but show (clothing) and wealth, and she also knows it is important to have the right manners and speech if one is to succeed in society'.[26] It seems that Potter is subverting the gender roles portrayed in earlier versions here- where the feline females were used to serve their masters in the past, Kitty serves only herself. She uses the role of the female cat not to serve a male master, but to serve a purpose in showcasing that females are able to be independent and self-sufficient.

Despite some of the negative reviews of the *Tale of Kitty-in-Boots* – Alex O'Connell writing in The Sunday Times said 'there are sections baggier than Bagpuss[27]- we must see it as part of something much bigger than Potter's collected works, it is part of a dialogue which spans centuries and continents. Potter is not just simply writing another of her charming simple tales, she is putting the female voice back in the narrative of a traditional folk tale and in doing so, subverts some of the traditionally female roles of submission and servitude.

"I will get a doll dressed like a policeman!": Authority with the policeman and Dr Maggoty

Whilst Potter gives her female characters plenty of different working roles throughout her writing, what she doesn't give them are any positions which would be seen as being authoritative. This being said, it is only when we look at the characters who are playing out roles of authority that we can discuss reasons surrounding this. The two positions of authority that Potter presents to us are a doctor (in *The Tale of the Pie and the Patty Pan*) and a police officer (in *The Tales of Ginger and Pickles* and of *The Two Bad Mice*).

The Tale of Two Bad Mice written in 1904 is one of Potter's comedies. It tells the story of two mice who break into a doll's house to steal their belongings and disrupt their peaceful home. After the mice have caused the destruction of the house, 'the little girl that the dolls-house belonged to said- "I will get a doll dressed like a policeman!"'[28] There is a lot which is interesting here. First of all, and perhaps most obviously, the policeman is a doll. In fact, he isn't a policeman at all – he is a doll

[26] Zipes, p. 29.
[27] Alex O'Connell, The Tale of Kitty in Boots by Beatrix Potter, *The Times*, (2016) <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-tale-of-kitty-in-boots-by-beatrix-potter-pfhwhk7c2> [accessed 9 August 2018]
[28] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of the Two Bad Mice* (London: Frederick Warne, 1904), p. 14.

dressed like a policeman – an important distinction when we consider the way Potter dresses her characters up as a way of performance. The inanimate-ness of the police officer and the fact that he is not real at all could be a comment on authority by Potter. In *Beatrix Potter; Writing in Code*, Kutzer observes a 'faint echo…of some of the larger class issues of the time and specifically of labour unrest' and ultimately 'social authority in the form of the policeman doll' is 'ineffective against the desires of the mice' who are seen to be representatives of the various rebellions of the working class against working conditions.[29] The second thing to look at in this sentence is the fact that it is the human girl who declares that she will call for the policeman, not the dolls themselves. This highlights an even more human response to authority, the girl does not refer to the doll as just a policeman, she specifically says a doll which adds further to the inadequate inanimate portrayal of authoritative figures. This is taken even further, when in 1909 the doll dressed like a policeman appears again, this time in *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles.*

The policeman doll arrives at Ginger and Pickles' shop supposedly to speak to Pickles about his dog licence. However, his visit is again unfruitful as, being a doll, he does not speak. 'Bite him, Pickles bite him!' shouts Ginger as the police officer arrives declaring it is ok as 'he's only a German doll! (p.32). The policeman does not respond, and Potter notes 'twice he put his pencil in his mouth, and once he dipped it in the treacle'. Potter goes to some length to show us just how false this creation of authority is; 'he had bead eyes, and his helmet was sewed on with stitches' (p.32). If Potter is using the police doll as a comment on authority, it is a rather scathing view. Ginger's insistence that Pickles 'bite him' is particularly aggressive for Potter. Violence can often be found in Potter's writing, but it is never incited by one of her characters. We are given a clear portrayal of a police officer who is incapable and ultimately an ineffective figure in these tales. Not only that, the character is met with violence and disrespect.

The same could be said for her portrayal of a doctor in *The Tale of The Pie and the Patty Pan*. The character of Dr Maggoty takes the form of a magpie. Similar to the case with the police officer – the doctor is regarded as ineffective and disrespected. When Duchess thinks that she is choking on the

[29] Daphne Kutzer, *Beatrix Potter; Writing in Code* (London; Routledge, 2013), p. 75.

patty pan whilst at a dinner party, her host Ribby fetches the doctor. 'I will just lock up the spoons' (p.43) she says – a clear nod to the fact that Dr Maggoty is a magpie and therefore distracted by shiny things – not a great trait for a Doctor. Duchess responds by saying 'he is a Pie himself, he will certainly understand' (p.43). This is obviously Potter's attempt at a comedic play on words however, it also acts as a way to liken the doctor to the actual pie Duchess is choking on which is in effect, something dangerous. When Dr Maggoty arrives, he is of course useless, chirping out random phrases of 'Gammon, ha, HA?' (p.50) which can only be described as peculiar. Ribby, tired of his inefficiency, 'lose[s] her temper' and throws him 'out into the yard' (p.52). Ribby's refusal to have the doctor in her home is an evident rejection of authority on her part.

What links the characters of Dr Maggoty and the police officer is not just that they are authoritative figures, but that they are also male characters. So, whilst it is interesting that Potter does not give her female characters positions of authority this simply reflects that females were not given such positions of authority at the time she was writing. In creating these comedic characters, Potter not only depict the role of authority as problematic, she mocks the male characters who hold these positions.

"This is serious, Cousin Tabitha," said Ribby. "We must send for John Joiner at once, with a saw": Skill and identity with John Joiner

Another depiction of a working male character who is interesting to look at is John Joiner. Whilst Potter uses labour to highlight that work is just one of the many roles that women must carry out, she does quite the opposite in her creation of John Joiner. We meet him in *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers* when he is called upon to help free Tom Kitten. Ribby's decision to call John Joiner only when she realises that it is 'serious' could at first seem to be more of a comment on female ability rather than male. It is a serious situation, and therefore it requires male help. His name conveys an interesting point around the way he is seen by the other characters in the tale and by extension Potter herself. By including the job that he does in his name, Potter ensures that he is seen as his job rather than as a character with personality. It says something about his worth as a character and as an individual – he is only called upon when his skill is needed, and it is a very specific skill.

After John Joiner ‘had got the plank up’ in order to find and save Tom Kitten, we are told that because of the ‘strong smell of rats’ he spent ‘the rest of the morning sniffing and whining and wagging his tail, and going round and round with his head in the hole like a gimlet’ (p.62). The use of the word gimlet here is what enables us to say that Potter is depicting this character as little more than the role he plays as a joiner. She is using the language of the trade which would not necessarily be part of the vocabulary of Potter’s child or adult audience. It is the smell of rats which results in John Joiner continuing to explore the hole after saving Tom Kitten which his natural reaction as a dog to want to find the creature he can smell. But it is the fact that Potter uses the metaphor of a gimlet – a tool used for drilling small holes – which emphasises this point. Even when he is carrying out something which is natural to him as a dog such as hunting, he is referred to as something which is not a natural to him, a tool used by humans. It is almost as though we lose any sense that John Joiner is a dog – he is simply the job he is hired to carry out. This is again emphasised when Potter notes that after ‘they invited him to stay for dinner’ he declined as ‘he had just finished making a wheelbarrow’ and still had ‘two hen-coops’ to make for another customer (p.65). The customer is in fact Miss. Potter. One could argue that Potter is supporting John Joiner in the way that she supports old Mrs Rabbit – paying for their product. However, the fact that John Joiner isn’t able to stay for dinner because of the work that he is providing Potter means that it is Potter herself who is excluding him from partaking in anything other than his work. Essentially John Joiner is not allowed to include himself in the dinner party and Potter makes sure of this.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, John Joiner only appears in one tale through Potter’s collected works. Unlike other characters and specifically female characters, he is not given the opportunity to showcase other sides of his identity. It would of course not be fair to say that this is something Potter excludes all her male characters from but it is significant when we look at the way work is portrayed for females in comparison to male characters. There are no male characters who we see in as many differing roles as female characters are. Female characters are given the opportunity to show themselves as parents, as friends, as workers but for male characters we are often only shown them in one or two different roles and this is made all the more significant in the creation of John Joiner.

Labour is the one area that Potter allows her female characters to have any sort of success and even support. Not only do the characters in her tales support the work of the female characters, but she even offers support herself. Where Potter has used her narrative to judge and put forward a negative commentary of the roles her female characters play with regards to motherhood and friendship – in this arena she does quite the opposite – offering encouragement and positive reinforcement. She allows her characters exploit their labour roles to their own advantage. Traditionally domestic roles such as cleaning and ironing become the core of their ability to earn a living. She not only gives this opportunity to her characters as a way to make money, but she gives them ownership over these skills in a way which helps them protect and control their environments and themselves.

With the publication of *The Tale of Kitty in Boots* we can see how Potter entered into a dialogue centuries old to reclaim an originally female space, subverting typically female roles of servitude and allowing her protagonist to own her abilities free of a master who could take credit for her knowledge and skills. Potter's business-minded nature is certainly something which is woven into her tales. Whether it is conscious or not, Potter lays the foundations for her female characters to thrive in an economy which was ready to accept them.

Conclusion

'As an adult reader, I must say, I'm beginning to like her'[1] wrote Stuart Jeffries in his article in The Guardian detailing his response to reading Beatrix Potter to his daughter. Like many stories from our childhood, it is only when we revisit them as an adult that we understand their different meanings. As Bruno Bettelheim notes, fairy tales should 'reach[es] the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult'[2] and this certainly something true of Beatrix Potter's collected tales.

Potter created a whole world in which her talking animals inhabited and chronicled everything from the mundane to the fantastic. It is only through a close reading of her tales and a study of her characters in their multiple appearances throughout her oeuvre that we can begin to discuss the ways in which Potter used her tales to comment on wider socio-political issues at the time.

Throughout her oeuvre Potter highlights the hypocrisies within a society which through their unrealistic demands of women forces them to perform, rendering them superficial without freedom and true friendships. Motherhood and marriage - the two great pinnacles of achievement within an ideal of femininity are exemplified by restrictive and dangerous parenting, widowhood and a lack of supportive friendships. Potter tears down these attributes associated with a Victorian ideal of femininity and replaces them with entrepreneurial and business savvy 'feminist felines'[3] with an ability to exploit their skills for capital gain.

Potter's choice to use woodland animals as her central characters gives us a lot to discuss. Various studies suggest the use of anthropomorphism in children's books is used as a way to soften important moral life lessons. However, this does not seem to be something that Potter is concerned with, there are few morals to her tales and her child characters are at once disobedient but also suffer at the hands of their restrictive Victorian mothers. Anthropomorphism appears to be a method of

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[1] Stuart Jeffries, 'The Ugly Truth about Peter Rabbit', The Guardian, (2006) <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/dec/07/booksforchildrenandteenagers> [accessed 9 August 2018].
[2] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment – The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), p. 5.
[3] Heather A. Evans, 'Kittens and Kitchens: Food, Gender and *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*', Victorian Literature and Culture (2008), 36, 603–623, p. 604.

disguise for Potter, shrouding her opinions on her society in the fantastical layer of talking animals. She can say more explicitly with animals what she cannot say with human characters.

Animals (whether talking or not) are also timeless. Anthropomorphism continues to have popularity in children's books, television programmes and movies. This allows Potter's writing to continue to have relevance today; this coupled with the franchise that she built around her works is what drives us to celebrate her so widely. Potter was as well ahead of her time in many ways – the points she makes and the themes I have discussed are still applicable to modern society. Her depiction of female characters who either opt out of having children or who take typically unconventional routes is something which a modern reader can relate to. Jemima Puddle-duck, characterised for all her critics (Potter included) by her naivety, gullibility and nature as 'simpleton'[4]; could instead be seen as an independent and single-minded woman, determined to have a family despite what her society expects of her.

Likewise, Potter's highlighting of the importance of female friendships is something which has prominence in the current cultural zeitgeist. In her Sunday Times Bestseller *Everything I Know about Love,* writer and journalist Dolly Alderton writes, 'nearly everything I know about love, I've learnt from my long-term friendships with women'. Her memoir was published in February 2018 and its clear popularity demonstrates the continued importance of supportive female friendships for women. It is poignant that, just as in the Saturday Review article published in 1870 claiming that female friendships were a rehearsal for the real business of relationships with men [5], Alderton notes that this is something she has felt as a twenty-first century female, accusing her friend as seeing her as the 'warm-up act…until your headliner came along'.[6] Again, this points to the fact that the themes Potter explores remain issues that are discussed today.

In a similar vein to this is Potter's depiction of the working roles undertaken by her female characters. In particular, it is the entrepreneurship of her female characters and their role as business owners which is interesting. A 2017 study which looked at the data of 5 million people submitted by

[4] Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck* (London: Frederick Warne, 1905), p. 39.
[5] 'Friendship', *Saturday Review* (15 Jan. 1870), pp. 77–8.
[6] Dolly Alderton, *Everything I Know About Love* (London: Fig Tree, 2018), p .97.

Companies House, People with Significant Control (PSC) register found that 27.08% of business owners were female.[7] Whilst this is a marked increase from the 6% reported in the Aston and Di Martino study[8] it is still significantly less than male owned businesses. The role of women in business was clearly something close to Potter's heart. Her entrepreneurial nature is arguably at the root of her continued success. Her determined nature to not only self-publish but to create a franchise around her writing is remarkable and an indicator of why her female characters do so well in business. Where she highlights the importance of flexible approaches to motherhood and supportive female friendships with negative examples, she does the opposite with the theme of labour, giving her characters the tools for success.

The celebration of the 150th anniversary of Potter's birth has meant her works, whilst already incredibly popular, have resurfaced into the cultural conversation today. The anniversary series of 50p coins put into circulation by the Royal Mint, can be bought for around £8,000 on Ebay[9] and the release of a new movie based on the story of Peter Rabbit grossed $351 million worldwide[10] - a sequel has already been announced. The movie, however, brought some controversy as one scene showed a character attacking a man with blackberries, knowing he was allergic to them, causing him to go into anaphylactic shock. The producers were accused of allergy bullying and several activist groups promoted a boycott of the movie.[11] Whilst this isn't something Potter wrote herself, it seems her themes and her characters continue to cause controversy, conversation and concern amongst her fans. The publication of *The Tale of Kitty-in-Boots* also brought with it some controversy with some fans seeing it as a nice addition to her collection and others believing it lacked her charm and simplicity.

What is clear through a re-reading of her tales and with a particular focus on female characters is the role of the matriarch in Potter's works. We are presented with single mothers,

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[7] Noi Rotstein, 'Who Controls the Businesses of the UK?' (Finder, 23 January 2018) <https://www.finder.com/uk/business-owners-uk> [accessed 26 August 2018].
[8] Jennifer Aston and Paolo Di Martino, 'Risk, success, and failure: female entrepreneurship in late Victorian and Edwardian England', *The Economic History Review*, 70, 3 (2017) 837-858 (p.837).
[9] < https://www.ebay.co.uk/itm/50p-Coin-Beatrix-Potter-2016/202405789587?hash=item2f20533f93:g:4d8AAOSwjnpbdqH9> [accessed 28 August 2018].
[10] 'Peter Rabbit' (Box Office Mojo, March 2018) <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=peterrabbit.htm> [accessed 27 August 2018].
[11] Peter Rabbit film criticised for depicting allergy bulling (The Guardian ,11 February 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/feb/11/peter-rabbit-film-criticised-for-depicting-allergy-bullying> [accessed 27 August 2018].

widows, spinsters and business owners – all powerful single-minded women but not without their flaws. Tabitha Twitchit is an anxious mother, old Mrs Rabbit cannot discipline her son, Ribby struggles to maintain friendships and Sally Henny Penny is not the best at maths. However, Potter does not shy away from her portrayal of this. She paints her female characters as multi-faceted individuals who battle against social norms and succeed and survive by themselves.

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