

Magic Women on the Margins: Ec-centric Models in Mary Poppins and Ms Wiz

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Abstract This paper offers a comparative analysis of two characters belonging to the tradition of empowered “spinster” in children’s fiction, namely Mary Poppins and Ms Wiz, from the perspective of gender politics and child/adult interactions. A distinction is made between the figure portrayed in P. L. Travers’ texts and the Disney film starring Julie Andrews, which turned the magic nanny into a cultural icon. These two renderings of the powerful, single woman, in turn, are contrasted with Terence Blacker’s postmodern depiction of the good witch in the “Ms Wiz” series, with a view to tracing the evolution of the ostracised female wizard, a character inherited from folklore that has its origin in the Great Mother archetype. As is demonstrated, each representation of the supernatural woman modifies the manner in which the feminine influences the patriarchal order.

Keywords Alterity · Archetypes · Feminism · Gender studies · P. L. Travers · Terence Blacker · Disney

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The Powerful Spinster Revisited

One of the commonest motifs in folklore is that of the female endowed with magic powers and inhabiting realms beyond the ordinary world. She may appear as benefactor (good fairy, fairy godmother) or as a harmful, menacing presence (bad fairy, witch), thus embodying the antagonistic roles of protector and foe. In Jungian terms, the dual nature of the powerful female harks back to the Great Mother archetype, which may be both creative and destructive, possessing a nourishing as well as a devouring side (Jung, 1960; Neumann, 1955; Von Franz, 1996). Manifestations of the Great Mother abound in folk and fairy tales, encompassing idealized visions of femininity as well as threatening depictions of it, the latter commonly embodied in the sinister old woman, the hag, or crone version of the goddess. The wizard woman questions the very order from which she is excluded by means of extraordinary skills, capable of defying normal human rules. While remaining outside traditional ties of kinship, her power manifests itself as an unmanageable force that escapes patriarchal control.

The present paper focuses on the modern enactment of the Great Mother archetype in children's literature by comparing two emblematic characters belonging to the tradition of the empowered spinster; namely, the classic, enduring Mary Poppins and the postmodern, subversive, politically correct Ms Wiz.

Ms Wiz, the charming character devised by Terence Blacker, shares with Mary Poppins an enormous popularity amongst young readers, as she uses her magic to fulfil the wishes of the child protagonists. Like her predecessor, she is a powerful spinster on the margins of traditional family structures. In this respect, both characters question family relationships, disclosing the gaps in the established social order inasmuch as they, as outsiders, are required to sustain that order, on the verge of collapse. Thus, both engage in one of the fundamental tasks of the system, namely that of nurturing. Through their appropriation of parental roles, each, on entry, dismantles the fixed structure of the nuclear family.

Besides revealing the flaws herein, these characters also bring to the fore the awkward position of single women as outsiders. As Deborah J. Mustard (2000) puts it, single women "are viewed as being on the periphery of life: close but never quite able to join in." Despite the shift in perception of "spinsters," there is still something suspect about female independence, something that still threatens the status quo, as supported by Patricia O'Brien's reflections (1973, p. 74):

Underlying all the criticisms and attacks on women alone through history has been the uneasy fear that women who seek alternatives to marriage and motherhood might very well find them satisfying. The images of themselves that women have been presented with (and helped perpetuate) are intended to discourage or intimidate.... If women are allowed to flee on their broomsticks, couldn't they possibly destroy all that has been so carefully put together by men?

But Mary Poppins's and Ms Wiz's state of solitude is temporarily suspended through their strong alliance with children, to whom they offer the reassurance and comfort that their own parents fail to provide.

Before proceeding, it needs emphasising that the original Mary Poppins, as created by P. L. Travers in the 1930s, is treated distinctly in this article from the 1964 Hollywood depiction (dir. Robert Stevenson), which gave the character mythical status in Western culture. Apart from setting the action in 1910, the movie offers an altogether different vision of the nanny and her relationship with the Banks family. That the film “acutely focuses on questions of gender, family, and class anxiety that were almost absent in the books” (Kenschaft, 1999, p. 228) has not escaped the attention of scholars. The books straddle the film, beginning in 1934 with *Mary Poppins* (Travers 1988) and ending seven volumes later with *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door* (1988), all being illustrated by Mary Shepard (daughter of E. H. Shepard).

Twenty-four years after the release of the Disney film, Terence Blacker began drawing on the witch motif to reflect upon contemporary issues, such as the politics of gender and child/adult interactions. The “Ms Wiz” books relate the adventures of a captivating woman with paranormal powers. Assuming the role of substitute teacher in the first volume, she subsequently takes on different roles (e.g. doctor, model, superstar) in order to help her third year students whenever they get into trouble.

In Ms Wiz, then, and the two versions of Mary Poppins, we see alternative versions of the feminine to that depicted in the patriarchal order, thereby challenging this order—and, in the case of Stevenson’s film, partially transforming it. However, Mary Poppins remains an outsider in that she fails to propose a new paradigm for family and society. Ms Wiz is slightly more successful in finding a place for herself, but she still foregrounds the many difficulties inherent in the task.

Mary Poppins, Sweet and Sour

The very name, Mary Poppins, conjures up memories of flying umbrellas, fancy hats, anthropomorphic objects, and magic sidewalk paintings. As stated before, the Disney industry was largely responsible for these associations. It popularised the eccentric nanny gifted with magic powers, whose approach to education was very much in accordance with the motto “to instruct and amuse.” However, Julie Andrews’ character bears little resemblance to the grumpy figure portrayed by Travers. As Jenny Koralek (1999, p. 39) writes of the latter, “There is absolutely nothing jolly, funny, or cozy about Mary Poppins. Not given to unnecessary chatter or kissing and cuddling, she does have occasional moments of tenderness; but above all, she is *always there*, strong, calm, reliable.” Apart from offering a much more sugary version of Mary herself, the film also takes a rather lighter approach to magic, shifting the focus from occult references and hidden nuances to more earthly, substantial issues; in particular, family relations and socio-political structures.

P. L. Travers’ Mary Poppins

Those approaching Travers’ series after watching the Disney film are indeed likely to experience a double sense of wonder. Besides being wrapped up in the amazing

events presented, there is a rich body of symbolism to uncover. Readers familiar with the conventions of esoteric literature will find themselves able to identify a number of allusions to occult motifs. There are, for instance, references to ritual dances and echoes of theosophical theories about human origin and evolution, something one would not expect in a series of books for children. But were the books really intended specifically for the young? As Travers' article, "I Never Wrote for Children" indicates, she did not have in mind a particular audience while writing her books:

You do not chop off a section of your imaginative substance and make a book specifically for children for—if you are honest—you have, in fact, no idea where childhood ends and maturity begins. It is all endless and all one. And from time to time, without intention or invention, this whole body of stuff, each part constantly cross-fertilizing every other, sends up—what is the right word?—intimations. And the best you can do, if you are lucky, is to be there to jot them down.... Your role is that of the necessary lunatic who remains attentive and in readiness, unself-conscious, unconcerned, all disbelief suspended, even when frogs turn into princes and when nursemaids, against all gravity, slide up the banisters. (Travers, 1999, pp. 182–183)

As this shows, she envisaged the creative task as a sort of revelation or visionary experience. Stories, she believed, were not just made up by the individual mind; somehow, they had a pre-existence of their own. It was the writer's task to capture them out of the rich store of the imagination. Accordingly, she considered her creation of Mary not so much a personal fabrication as a sort of discovery.

Travers' consideration of folklore as a source of ancient wisdom, together with her deep involvement in esoteric thought and her ideas on the writing process are key elements in helping us fully comprehend her Mary Poppins character. For this nanny is elusive and mysterious, and addresses the children in a like manner, valuing suggestion and personal discovery rather than simply informing them about how things are. In this manner, Mary Poppins' secrecy and private codes challenge the rules prevalent in the Banks' household.

The film derives mainly from the first book of the series, *Mary Poppins*, and it is this volume, together with the second one, *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, that will serve to illustrate the theories proposed. Chapter One of *Mary Poppins* introduces the ordered universe of the Banks family. Mr Banks works in the City, where he spends his days making money while sitting on a large chair in front of a large desk. Mrs Banks organises house matters. The servants and the cook each have their place and occupation, while the children are left in the nursery, looking through the window, their nanny having just left. Thus the nursery is a place of subjection for the children, conforming to their parents' strict rules. On her arrival, and within the confines of this room, Mary Poppins conforms to the role of a strict, authoritarian nanny, performing her duties in a "most efficient way":

"Is that your medicine?" enquired Michael, looking very interested.

"No, yours," said Mary Poppins, holding out the spoon to him. Michael stared.

He wrinkled up his nose. He began to protest.

“I don't want it. I don't need it. I won't!”

But Mary Poppins's eyes were fixed upon him, and Michael suddenly discovered that you could not look at Mary Poppins and disobey her. There was something strange and extraordinary about her—something that was frightening and at the same time most exciting. (Travers, 1998a, p. 17)

Much to Michael's surprise, the medicine has a delicious flavour: “‘Strawberry ice,’ he said ecstatically. ‘More, more, more!’” (ibid.) But Mary Poppins, “her face as stern as before”, ignores the child and goes on with her duties, adamant not to admit her indulgence.

If Mary Poppins comes to subvert the established order, she does so in a clandestine manner. Through the magic adventures in which she involves the children they gain access to a supra-sensual reality inaccessible to adults, and their parents in particular. Her magic endeavours tend to occur at night-time, when the logic of the household is suspended, a circumstance that enables the children to discover other levels of reality, together with a system of values different from the one prevalent in their own *milieu* (for instance, they learn to respect all creatures). Despite her seemingly officious and irritable manner, then, she helps the children appreciate the importance of dreams and the imagination. An example occurs in *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, where, in response to Mary Poppins' rebuke, “You want! You want! You're always wanting. If it's not this it's that, and if it's not that it's the other. You'll ask for the Moon next” (Travers, 1998b, p. 153), Michael mockingly wishes for the Moon. That very night, he and Jane are led on a journey to the sky. There, the constellations dance round a couple composed of Mary Poppins and the flaming figure of the Sun. During one of the rituals performed, the Moon lands in Michael's lap. When asked by Michael about the reality of the Moon he has been given to hold, the Sun replies, “What is real and what is not? Can you tell me or I you? Perhaps we shall never know more than this: that to think a thing is to make it true” (ibid., p. 176). The narrator concludes: “And so, if Michael thought he had the Moon in his arms—why, then, he had indeed” (ibid). As usual, the next morning Mary Poppins denies any involvement in the mysterious adventure.

Mary Poppins' participation in the cosmic dance stresses her condition as a sky figure, suggested throughout the series. If brought in and carried away by the wind in the first book, in *Mary Poppins Comes Back* she leaves on a merry-go-round that “rose, spinning, from the ground ... rising ever higher and higher” (p. 248), whirling up towards the stars till “it was just a tiny, twinkling shape, a little larger but not otherwise different from a star” (ibid., p. 250). Apart from the occult connotations of the various cosmic journeys and dances, Mary Poppins' airy, volatile nature functions as a trope for her ability to escape and transcend the constraints of the Banks household. The association of flying with liberation and resistance to the imposed order is reinforced by several other episodes in the books. For example, in the “Laughing Gas” chapter, the children, Mary Poppins, and her uncle, Mr Wiggs, end up having tea suspended in the air, for Mr. Wiggs has the particularity of becoming filled with laughing gas as a result of laughing on his birthday, provided it falls on a Friday. Only by thinking of serious matters can he

return to earth. In short, this motif stresses the dichotomy between the “gravity” of the imposed order and the “levity” of those resisting that order (namely, Mary Poppins and her magic acquaintances). There are a number of other reversals, or inversions of the existing order in the series (especially in the anthropomorphic treatment of animals, such as Mrs Larkin’s dog, the dancing cow, the hamadryad, and the starling), leading Catherine L. Elick (2001) to state:

All of the Mary Poppins books by P. L. Travers have a carnivalesque quality. In nearly every episode in the series, the Banks children leave the rule-bound world of the English nursery, where they are held in repressive check by their parents and their authoritarian nanny, and are liberated to experience a topsy-turvy world in which tea-time guests are suspended ... or inverted ..., and parties are held among the stars ... or below the sea In keeping with the nature of carnival celebration, a number of these episodes occur at night, in that time between dusk and dawn when toys and storybook characters come alive and beings from all orders of creation are allowed to converse and cavort.

Of particular significance is the episode in which Jane and Michael are secretly transported by Mary Poppins to the zoo, ostensibly during their sleep. There they witness an inversion of roles between people and animals, in which humans are kept in cages and fed by animals. The episode culminates in a mystic ritual, the dance of the Great Chain of Being, orchestrated by Mary Poppins and the hamadryad, or cobra. The words addressed to the children by the cobra are tinged with symbolic resonance: “Bird and beast and stone and star—‘we are all one, all one—’” (Travers, 1998a, p. 144). Although Travers’ esoteric beliefs permeate the passage (the unity of all beings is one of the essential theological doctrines), the episode likewise suggests a subversion of categories in the way that Elick observes.

From here we may conclude that Travers’ work functions on two levels. At one level she inverts the normal order of things, thus questioning issues of power, class, authority and social order in general. However, beneath this there is a less conscious level that gestures towards the contents of the collective unconscious, where things remain unexplained, elusive, but suggestive and evocative. As we have seen, Travers herself believed that imaginative works derived from this realm, pre-existing the author. Characters like Mary Poppins certainly have this archetypal quality, and their behaviour remains shrouded in mystery, not deriving from left-hemisphere, logical realms of thought.

Disney’s Mary Poppins

Moving on to the film version, the themes mentioned above (of power, class, authority and social order) are still in evidence. Thus the two initial songs of the musical question patriarchal authority. “Sister Suffragette,” performed by Mrs Banks, celebrates the defence of women’s rights; however, the depiction of the “lady of the house” as a feminist is clearly ironic, since her words do not match her actions: she becomes nervous and obedient as soon as Mr Banks enters. Thus her

activism is more a pose than an actual practice. The authority of the father, in turn, is exaggerated to the point of mockery in Mr Banks' song: "It's grand to be an Englishman in 1910;/King Edward's on the throne; it's the age of men./I'm the lord of my castle,/the sov'reign, the liege!/I treat my subjects: servants,/children, wife,/With a firm but gentle hand:/*Noblesse oblige*." In the hierarchical model presented, the father/child relationship is tinged with imperial undertones: "It's six-o-three and the heirs to my dominion/Are scrubbed and tubbed and adequately fed,/And so I'll pat them on the head and send them off to bed—/Ah, lordly is the life I lead." The military resonances are intensified in Mr Banks' depiction of the ideal nanny: "A British nanny must be a general,/The future empire lies within her hands./And so the person that we need to mold the breed/Is a nanny who can give commands" (Stevenson, 1964). Such requirements form a contrast to those of the children, themselves willing to have a "sweet, witty, and fairly pretty nanny" who takes them on outings, gives them treats, sings songs, brings sweets and loves them as son and daughter, according to "The Perfect Nanny" lyrics. Complying with such wishes, Mary embodies Jane and Michael's utopian dream, launching an alternative educational model that opposes the authoritarian one proposed by Mr Banks. Disney's *Mary Poppins* even challenges the father figure—something that Mrs Banks is unable to do—and goes as far as to teach Mr Banks to behave properly in order to be a good father. If magic operates as the transforming energy allowing Mary and the children to look at things anew, this sort of "positive energy" transcends the walls of the nursery and influences the whole community, as becomes evident in the final sequence of the film. The Banks are in the park, flying a kite, together with many other happy families and citizens who have also been influenced by Mary Poppins' lofty ideals, amongst them the directors of the bank. Having accomplished her mission, Mary Poppins the nanny leaves this utopian scene, though not without a tinge of pensiveness: while ascending into the London skies, she looks down on the children with a nostalgic gaze.

The film's subtexts, regarding gender and cultural politics, have attracted the attention of several critics. For Chris Cuomo (1995, p. 213), the magic nanny is a "spinster in sensible shoes," an autonomous female who, although resisting the role of motherhood and challenging the authority of the patriarch, fails to subvert the social order. Since, thanks to Mary Poppins' endeavours, Mr Banks has learnt the importance of attending to his family, what Mary Poppins does—Cuomo concludes—is not to upset, but to validate traditional values and images of woman and family, and to transform such order in line with the times, thus legitimising it. The acquiescent side of Mary Poppins' performance is also acknowledged by Anne McLeer (2002), who regards her as a threshold figure and an interloper in the family, responsible for reinstalling the father's position as head, a role that was thought to be in jeopardy at the time. For Jon Simmons (2000), "the main ideological legitimation of *Mary Poppins* for 1964 refers to what Habermas (1988) calls *privatism*, meaning fulfilment in the private sphere." Nevertheless, Simmons also points out that the film inadvertently raises questions about the fundamental contradictions of capitalism, and observes that the ideal of personal fulfilment through domestic harmony is, to some extent, problematised, as Mary is left out of the bliss of family reconciliation. In turn, Lori Kenschaft (1999, p. 235) highlights

the inadequacy of interpreting *Mary Poppins* as a totalising narrative; on the one hand, because young children are unable to comprehend the movie as a whole; on the other, because the nature of the film encourages viewers to see it as a series of episodes. In her estimation, there are other layers of meaning apart from the compliance inherent in the final scene, especially in terms of the socio-economic system, which is shown to be fractured at a number of points.

For the purposes of this article, what matters is not so much whether Mary Poppins subverts traditional roles or strengthens them. The important thing is that her philosophy alters the status quo, and does so in a “female” way: she introduces a caring, loving, emotional approach to life. The moving force behind her actions is heart-based, and opposes the instrumental, materialistic trend of American capitalist society in the 1960s. Mary Poppins ushers in a model that relocates the value system, focussing on people, not goods or economic interest, and breaks down—albeit momentarily—class barriers (Bert, Mary Poppins, and the chimney-sweepers mingle happily with the middle-class protagonists). Such a model, the final scene seems to suggest, is capable of making the world a better place. Magic is thus equated with an attitude towards life, a sort of “happiness condition,” that allows people to explore other modes of experience and behaviour. Viewers are thus invited to explore the paths of the imagination and the unconscious. Transformation through womanly love is the alternative offered to the logical, pragmatic orientation of masculine discourse (Tompkins, 1986).

The Disney figure represents a step forward with respect to Travers' nanny, who functions mostly as a mediator between worlds, helping the child protagonists glimpse a parallel dimension not accessible to adults and one that hardly interferes with their everyday reality. Thus, rather than altering the state of affairs, Mary Poppins provides them with a means of escape. And yet, the Mary Poppins portrayed by Julie Andrews remains an outsider: she never moves from margin to centre, and must, in the end, leave the children. In contrast, the modern witch depicted by Terence Blacker not only influences the world around, but manages to successfully integrate with it, notwithstanding the prejudices that must still be confronted by single women at the end of the twentieth century, as depicted in the series.

Ms Wiz, or the Charm of Being a Charmer

Terence Blacker is still producing his delightful series of Ms Wiz books, illustrated by Tony Ross, of which there are currently 22 titles, beginning with *Ms Wiz Spells Trouble* (1988). In an interview, Blacker explained:

I thought I would write three books—six maximum. I have thought quite often of retiring Ms Wiz—in *Ms Wiz Loves Dracula* she actually falls in love which, of course, is never good for magic—but I get so many letters from children that I've kept writing the stories. The stories have become stranger over the years, and so has she—in the last three books, she has visited the underworld, gone to Hollywood and won the lottery. She will in fact probably retire soon, although writing about her is a little annual treat for me. (ACHUKA, 2001)

The best-selling series, characterised by its humour, has gained enormous popularity amongst young readers, posing questions that are central to the lives and interests of children. As is the case with most contemporary works, the narration encourages readers to align themselves with the child protagonists, who are involved in a reality in which parents shouting at each other, adults cheating, and teachers picking their noses are not infrequent events.

Who is this Ms Wiz character, then, that has enchanted so many children? If we start by analysing her name, the “Ms” she chooses to use, defined in the Collins dictionary as “a title used before the name of a woman to avoid indicating whether she is married or not,” is most revealing. She refuses to be labelled or categorised by society at all. In the first book of the series she is quite explicit about her reasons for being called “Ms”: “I’m not a Mrs because I’m not married, thank goodness, and I’m not Miss because I think Miss sounds silly for a grown woman, don’t you?” (Blacker, 1988, pp. 4–5). Almost 20 years after the book was written, Blacker (2007) acknowledged Ms Wiz’s significance as an autonomous woman resisting traditional gender roles: “the story explained why Ms Wiz used that prefix She turned out to be the very model of female empowerment.”

The first book’s opening, “Most teachers are strange and the teachers at St Barnabas School were no exception,” sets the tone of the series, as the remark suggests that the narrator will be on the children’s side. Accordingly, the awkwardness of the teachers is then exemplified, with none of the ones at this particular school being “quite as odd as Class Three’s new teacher” (Blacker, 1988, p. 1). That there is something very peculiar about Ms Wiz is made evident from the very first page: “Some of the children in Class Three thought she was a witch. Others said she was a hippy. A few of them thought she was just a bit mad.” But her appearance is not frightening in the least: “She wore tight jeans and a purple blouse. Her fingers were decorated with several large rings and black nail varnish She looked as if she were on her way to a disco” (ibid.). The modern witch is devoid of the sinister tones of the fairy tale stereotype: Ms Wiz is a fashionable, tall, beautiful woman, rather on the alternative side. If this accounts for her looks, her disposition is of the best sort, for she is a most generous, sweet-hearted creature, always ready to help children and go “wherever a little bit of magic is needed.” That is her mission, as she makes clear from the beginning. However, her powers may only be employed for a good cause; she stresses that spells are not to be used for revenge or personal ambition. For instance, in *Ms Wiz Spells Trouble* (1988), her magic serves to reassure Podge—the clumsy boy in Class Three—and reinforce his self-esteem when he becomes the champion of a football match; in *In Stitches with Ms Wiz* (1989) she turns into a doctor and takes care of Jack—“Class Three’s Disruptive Element” (Blacker, 1988, p. 4)—who has appendicitis; finally, in *You’re Nicked, Ms Wiz* (1989), she pursues a band of criminals who kidnap cats to make gloves out of their skin. Through her powers, she rights wrongs and teaches children to be better people.

Drawing on the witch motif, Blacker reflects upon gender politics, child/adult relationships, and other aspects of dominance influencing the universe of the young. The strength of the stories mostly derives from Blacker’s treatment of marginality. Ms Wiz is, for many adults, the feared other, rejected for being odd. Her supernatural powers function, at one level, as a metaphor for this otherness.

Of course, Ms Wiz is always on the side of the outcasts: her endeavours empower the weak and counterbalance their rejection by society. Thus, the class issue is approached in *Ms Wiz Smells a Rat* (1998) through the hilarious episode in which Ms Wiz's talking pet rat, Herbert, falls in love with a street rat. There is an ironic inversion of the parent/teenager clash about "unsuitable mates," since it is actually Lizzie, one of the Class Three girl protagonists, who warns Herbert about the inconveniences of an unequal match: "'She's different from you.' Lizzie spoke gently, not wanting to hurt Herbert's feelings. 'She'll probably have ... fleas and things'" (Blacker, 1998, p. 16).

Accepting difference is by no means the only ethical issue explored in the series. In fact, each book centres on a key topic regarding children's development and values. The obsession with beauty and bodily perfection—one of the most outstanding adolescent concerns—is the issue at stake in *Ms Wiz Supermodel* (1997), a book that also explores the manner in which parents and society make a profit out of children. In this work, Katrina's parents decide to sign up their daughter to be a model so that they can benefit economically. That parents are imperfect, sometimes selfish, is no taboo in the series. Husband and wife relationships often appear unbalanced, as expressed in the depiction of Podge's parents visiting Ms Wiz at Parents' Evening: "'I'm Harris,' said a large man in a suit, who was the first parent to arrive. He shook Ms Wiz firmly by the hand. 'This,' he nodded curtly towards a nervous-looking woman standing a pace behind him, 'is Mother'" (Blacker, 1988, p. 38). Mr Harris claims to speak for his wife when complaining to Ms Wiz about Podge's recent interest in books and school, conduct that has proven to be fatal for family life, since the child's continuous inquiring prevents them from watching television. As Mr. Harris declares, "Tea, telly, bed" is their way.

Falling in love is the subject of *Ms Wiz Loves Dracula* (1993). A mysterious vampire—who turns out to be the school inspector—steals Ms Wiz's heart at a disguise party. She falls for a vampire, but a fake one. Ms Wiz ends up marrying Mr Arnold, a tender, loving person who, although initially shocked when first hearing about her powers, finally accepts her the way she is (i.e. as "paranormal"). The fact that she promises him, out of sheer love, never to use her magic powers again seems to gesture towards her surrender to male authority. However, that Ms Wiz is going to "have it all" becomes clear when, notwithstanding her promise, she reflects upon her preferences about being wife or weirdo, and decides to be both "wife and weirdo" (Blacker, 1996, p. 25).

In this new phase of her life, Ms Wiz has a baby: William, or the Wiz Kid. But her temporary retreat to the domestic sphere also entails an upsurge of creativity and self-exploration. If she has always helped others, this is the time for her to reconstruct her identity, moving from the margins to the centre of the social *milieu*. Thus she begins writing her own story, becoming the narrator of her own experience as author and subject. It is the "I" that takes control:

Once upon a time I was a paranormal operative. Hardly a day would pass when I didn't do something really rather magical. Sometimes I flew around on a vacuum cleaner. Other days, I turned teachers into geese or travelled back in time or became Prime Minister for the afternoon (ibid., p. 28)

In this way, and in contrast to Mary Poppins, Ms Wiz fulfils herself through multiple roles, that is, as a professional, a nurturer, lover, mother, and as an artist.

Conclusion

Ms Wiz may be regarded as Mary Poppins' successor in more than one way. To begin with, they share an enigmatic appearance. This includes the "mythical" bag that each carries for their magical belongings. Also, just like Mary Poppins, Ms Wiz is the strange other, occupying a marginal position with respect to a woman's traditional role in society. Such otherness stems from their supernatural powers, which are generally employed to redress the power imbalance between adults and children. Both characters offer an alternative to the strict codes imposed on children by their elders, an alternative that proves to be highly satisfying, and very much in accordance with a child's liking for fantasy and thrill. Through their special abilities, not only do they manage to (re)establish harmony, but they also form empathetic bonds with the children.

Although having a common pattern, however, there are also important differences between these characters, which show how children's literature has been transformed in the course of the twentieth century, especially in relation to the areas of education, family, and gender roles. Thus, Travers' character remains aloof and detached from society, acting as mediator between the children and the magic realms. She does not overtly challenge the strict rules imposed on the children, nor does she attempt to change the state of things around her. Her method is to suggest alternatives to the young protagonists, albeit ones that lie outside the scope of their everyday reality. In contrast, the nanny of Disney's film deliberately transforms the social *milieu* of the Banks, imbuing the family and their acquaintances with a new sensibility (in contrast to their prevailing materialism): a model of human and family relationships that places children centre stage. Twenty-four years after the film, Ms Wiz re-enacted the role of the magic nurturer. Through her adventures, Blacker looks at today's world from a child's perspective. The books mirror how things are, not the way they should be. Beyond the hilarious episodes of the series, the narrator's critical gaze invites serious reflection. Ms Wiz comes to offer help to the silenced or unheard. But her achievements go beyond empowering the young, for she negotiates her own role and manages to find herself a place in the imperfect (prejudiced, male-oriented) world portrayed. The delicious mixture of humour and tenderness characterising her depiction, together with Tony Ross's wonderful illustrations, make Ms Wiz one of the most charming literary characters, for young and old alike.

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