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 **A Wilderness Inside: Domestic Space in the Work of Beatrix Potter**

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The Lion and the Unicorn

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 21, Number 2, April 1997

pp. 204-214

10.1353/uni.1997.0040

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**A Wilderness Inside:
Domestic Space in the Work of Beatrix Potter**

M. Daphne Kutzer (bio)

The so-called “little books” of Beatrix Potter are ironic on any number of counts. First, although they are physically small, their moral dimensions are quite large. Far from being simple tales of runaway bunnies and kittens, they are miniature novels of emotional weight and depth. Their miniature size (most were published in the familiar 10 x 14 cm size) is deceptive. The small size suggests small readers, but complexities of vocabulary and syntax suggest a more adult audience was intended to be part of the readership as well. And although the small size may seem appropriate to a child reader, any small child knows that larger formats are easier for less-coordinated hands to manipulate. The miniature size appeals more to the adult idea of what a child’s book should look like, rather than the child’s own ideas. The illustrations themselves provide further ironies: not only do they often make ironic comments on the text itself, but the very fact that quiet pastels illustrate stories of greed and near-death is ironic.

But perhaps the greatest irony in the books can be found in Potter’s use of domestic space. In book after book there is at the very least an ambiguous tension regarding the pleasures of home, and at times home itself becomes as perilous as the wilderness. Wilderness and wilderness threaten to invade and take over (as in the tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse), or they threaten to burst out of seemingly safe domestic spaces (as in *Peter Rabbit*).

In some ways we ought not be surprised by Potter’s ambiguous feelings regarding domestic spaces. Even as sympathetic a biographer as Lane finds herself using such phrases as “unnaturally lonely” (18) to describe the young Potter and “silence and blankness” (37) to describe Potter’s early adulthood. Potter’s life was constrained by daughterly duty to an extent extreme even by late Victorian standards, and some of Potter’s **[End Page 204]** letters suggest that she herself was not unaware of—and was unhappy with—the nature of her family life. In a letter to Norman Warne, apologizing for her inability to visit both him and his mother, she writes, “I hardly ever go out, and my mother is so exacting I had not enough spirit to say anything about it. I have felt vexed

with myself since, but I did not know what to do. It does wear a person out” (qtd. in [Linder 151](#)). She was thirty-six at the time.

Her books, however, gave her not only the physical means of escape—royalties being used to purchase Hill Top and some nominal freedom from family pressures—but also as a means of expressing, as much as she was able to express, her own rebellious feelings. Her imaginative working-out of this rebelliousness generally took the form of the portrayal of domestic space as dangerous and threatening, as can be seen in a number of her works.

Jemima Puddle-Duck (1908), for example, for all its delightful humor of bonneted and shawled ducks, is a rather dour look at the difficulties of motherhood and domestic life. Jemima is a barnyard duck, kept for her ability to lay eggs. But the farmer’s wife does not permit her to sit on and hatch her own eggs, for she is not to be trusted to brood them correctly, as even her sister-in-law acknowledges. Jemima has enough motherly instinct and enough wild duck left in her, however, to want to find her own secret spot and raise her ducklings herself. The conflict between her wild and her domestic sides leads to nothing but grief for Jemima, and her search for a safe domestic space leads only to death.

In this book, the illustrations are the source of most of the ironic commentary, although the text itself is a small masterpiece of understated irony. In an early illustration in the farmyard, we see that Jemima has attempted to hide her eggs under some rhubarb leaves, but that the farmer’s son has found and collected them while his mother looks on...



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