CHRISTIAN SCIENCE VERSUS THE REST CURE IN FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT'S THE SECRET GARDEN

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The unscientific practitioner says: "You are ill. Your brain is overtaxed, and you must rest. Your body is weak, and it must be strengthened. You have nervous prostration, and must be treated for it." [Christian] Science objects to all this, contending for the rights of intelligence and asserting that Mind controls body and brain.

— Mary Baker Eddy, Science and Health

British-born author Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849–1924), who later settled in the United States, is best known for children's classics like A Little Princess (1905) and The Secret Garden. During her lifetime, Burnett wrote over fifty novels for both adults and children and became the wealthiest woman writer of her day on either side of the Atlantic (Gerzina xvii). But because she is now remembered for her juvenile fiction, modern readers have tended to overlook Burnett's incisive commentary on social issues, including medical controversies. This commentary surfaces in fictions such as The Secret Garden, which can be read as a feminist, Christian Science revision of Silas Weir Mitchell's rest cure. As such nineteenth-century religious
movements as Christian Science and its offshoot, New Thought, have faded from public consciousness, we have lost an important context for Burnett’s work that helps make sense of her fiction.

We must also attend to the medical contexts of The Secret Garden in order to understand the novel’s protest against fin de siècle medical treatments. Burnett and her contemporaries would have been familiar with the rest cure, which was the standard treatment for female invalids around 1900. The rest cure involved lengthy periods of bed rest, social isolation, massage, and force-feeding. Invented in the 1870s by Mitchell, a Philadelphia neurologist, the cure was used to treat ailments such as hysteria and neurasthenia, a nineteenth-century term for nerve weakness that encompassed depression, anxiety, migraines, indigestion, fatigue, and other symptoms. Nineteenth-century physicians believed that neurasthenia had a somatic basis, specifically, a deficiency or "lack of nerve force" in the body (Beard 5). This deficiency could be hereditary or caused by overwork that depleted the available energy in the nervous system. Accordingly, the rest cure addressed the physical rather than psychological causes of nervous disorders. The goal was to help patients regain nerve force and repair wasted tissues through rest and enhanced nutrition.

Mitchell initially designed the rest cure during the Civil War as a means of treating soldiers with severe nerve damage from bullet wounds (Cervetti 81). Approximately eight years later, he repurposed the treatment for a different but equally challenging set of patients: "that class well known to every physician,—nervous women, who as a rule are thin, and lack blood" (Fat and Blood 9). He laid out the basics of his cure in the popular volume Fat and Blood, and How to Make Them, which had been translated into four languages by the time of Mitchell’s death in 1914 (Poirier 15). The popularity of the rest cure gradually waned in the early to mid-twentieth century in response to broader shifts in scientific culture. While nineteenth-century physicians typically favored somatic explanations for mental illness such as heredity, low energy levels, nerve lesions, or bilateral brain hemisphere asymmetry, twentieth-century physicians increasingly turned to psychoanalysis to explore the psychic underpinnings of mental disease. By the mid-twentieth century, physicians had largely abandoned the rest cure in favor of the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Jung. But from the 1880s to the 1920s, Mitchell’s rest cure was among the most popular treatment options for nervous illness, particularly for middle- to upper-class female patients.

Compared to other treatments available to nervous women at the time, such as ovariotomy, hysterectomy, and long-term institutionalization, the rest cure seemed relatively benign, a factor that may help to account for its success (Cervetti 109). But even so, the
cure deprived patients of companionship, mental stimulation, and physical exercise. Mitchell’s regimen of rest and feeding was intended to instill "order and control" that might serve as "moral medication" for coddled or selfish invalids (Fat and Blood 41). Typically, Mitchell’s patients were not allowed to read, write, sew, feed themselves, or have contact with friends or family. The patient had to lie in bed for six weeks to two months; during this period, she needed the doctor’s permission to sit up or turn over without assistance. She would likely be fed a heavy diet including enormous amounts of meat and milk, plus iron supplements and doses of strychnine, arsenic, or cod liver oil (Stiles, "The Rest Cure"). Patients who refused to eat might be force-fed through the nose or rectum, or (rarely) whipped to ensure obedience (Poirier 23). In his clinical writings, Mitchell was remarkably honest about the punitive nature of the cure when applied to uncooperative female patients:

To lie abed half the day, and sew a little and read a little, and be interesting and excite sympathy, is all very well, but when [patients] are bidden to stay in bed a month, and neither to read, write, nor sew, and to have one nurse,—who is not a relative—then rest becomes for some women a rather bitter medicine, and they are glad enough to accept the order to rise and go about. (Fat and Blood 43)

Despite the rigidity of the cure, many women claimed to benefit from it and appreciated Mitchell’s autocratic bedside manner. For instance, authors Rebecca Harding Davis and Amelia Gere Mason befriended Mitchell during their respective rest cures and corresponded with him thereafter. Mason credited Mitchell with "restoring 'value' to her life" when he treated her neurasthenia in 1882 (Schuster 705). But others found the cure positively stifling, particularly active women who enjoyed reading, writing, and physical exercise. Charlotte Perkins Gilman famously decried Mitchell’s treatment in her harrowing short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), whose protagonist goes mad while enduring a modified rest cure. This story was loosely based on Gilman’s own experiences. In the spring of 1887, Gilman traveled to Philadelphia to see the doctor then regarded as "the greatest nerve specialist in the country" (Gilman 95). She was suffering from what we would now call postpartum depression following the birth of her daughter. Mitchell diagnosed her with hysteria and began his usual treatments. He reportedly instructed Gilman to "[l]ive as domestic a life as possible . . . and never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live" (96). After faithfully following this "prescription" for months, Gilman wrote, she "came perilously near to losing my mind. The mental agony grew so unbearable that I would sit blankly moving
my head from side to side." Virginia Woolf, too, reportedly detested the rest cures she underwent during episodes of severe depression, feeling that "eating and resting made her worse" (Woolf 155). In her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf depicts a traumatized war veteran, Septimus Warren Smith, who kills himself in order to avoid a rest cure at the hands of a fashionable Harley Street physician.

Due in part to the writings of Gilman and Woolf, Mitchell's treatment is often cited as an example of nineteenth-century medical misogyny. But it is important to note the divergent reactions of patients undergoing the cure, some of whom appreciated the regimented care. It is not entirely certain where Burnett herself falls on this spectrum since she did not leave detailed records of her own medical treatments. But we do know that Burnett underwent more than one inpatient treatment for her recurring bouts of insomnia and depression, which she called "nervous prostration" (qtd. in V. Burnett 125). These treatments, which involved "lengthy periods of bed rest," probably resembled Mitchell's rest cure, or some variant thereof (Gerzina 51). These largely unsuccessful cures may have contributed to Burnett's lifelong distrust of mainstream medicine. Burnett's disdain for the rest cure comes across most forcefully in *The Secret Garden* where a modified form of Mitchell's treatment is shown to be ineffective, if not downright harmful, for a spoiled young hypochondriac.

The first section of this essay will explore Burnett's depressions and the treatments she received, both mainstream and unorthodox. I will explain why Burnett turned to Christian Science and a related movement called New Thought as a means of rethinking women's relationship to mainstream medicine. The remainder of this piece will elucidate the role of Christian Science and New Thought in two of Burnett's novels written after 1902, the year in which she experienced her most serious bout of nervous prostration (V. Burnett 302).¹ Her 1906 novel, *The Dawn of a To-morrow*, was a blockbuster success in its day but is now mostly forgotten. *The Secret Garden*, meanwhile, was only moderately successful when first published but is now a children's classic (Gerzina x). Both novels feature female children curing male invalids via positive thinking. While Burnett seems to have been aware of Mitchell's theories about mental illness and its treatment, her fiction promotes wholesome activity rather than rest as a means to health and happiness. In her works it is female children rather than male doctors who possess the key to recovery. Burnett's fiction thus reverses the gender politics of the rest cure and refutes its basic principles.

But while she challenged Mitchell's method of treating nervous illness, Burnett did not contradict the medical theories on which his
cure was based. She shared his idea that neurasthenia was caused by lack of available energy in the nervous system but suggested an entirely different means of treating nervous illness that granted women a central role. Burnett was not alone in her views. Many New Thought writers shared Burnett’s dream of female-centered spiritual healing. The Secret Garden harnessed key ideas present in New Thought literature and popularized them for the mainstream so successfully that children today still read and internalize her message without recognizing its source.

Conquering Depression with New Thought

During her last illness, Burnett told her son Vivian that she hoped to cheer her readers: "With the best that was in me I have tried to write more happiness into the world" (qtd. in Adams 314). But paradoxically, Burnett’s own "life was not a happy one," as Vivian explained shortly after her death (qtd. in Gerzina xvi). Burnett struggled with insomnia and depression throughout her life, particularly when she was worn down by the pressures of nonstop writing. While it would be anachronistic to apply modern labels to Burnett’s condition, her personal correspondence reveals a pattern of depression alternating with elation that characterizes various forms of bipolar disorder. In one letter dated around 1877, Burnett begs her editor, Richard Watson Gilder, to tell her whether her book-in-progress is "good or bad" so she can decide whether or not to destroy it. In a subsequent letter to Gilder from May of 1878, she gloats over her rapid progress: "I am writing a chapter every morning now and am so wild over things generally that I can hardly keep my feet on the floor. I may finish in a week." The difference between the two letters lies not just in their tone, but also Burnett’s handwriting, which is considerably more rushed in the 1878 letter. Whatever Burnett’s condition was, it appears to have been hereditary. Her son Vivian periodically became "ill . . . from overwork," and his mother worried that he might suffer a nervous breakdown (Gerzina 229).

Burnett’s own attacks of nervous prostration often led to extended stays at clinics and "lengthy periods of bed rest" (Gerzina 51). At Fishkill Landing Sanitarium in New York, Burnett sought "mental and physical rest" following the failure of her second marriage in 1902 ("Authoress in a Sanitarium" 1). Again in 1919, Burnett underwent a sort of modified rest cure under the care of a Dr. Fowler, who discouraged her from getting out of bed, reading anything exciting, or writing more than one letter per day (Burnett to Elizabeth Jordan). Despite these treatments, lasting relief eluded her. Like Mary Lennox,
the sickly heroine of *The Secret Garden*, Burnett admitted to being "always ill—in one way or another" (qtd. in V. Burnett 382).

Though Burnett continued to seek help from doctors throughout her life, she frequently expressed dissatisfaction with mainstream medicine. "Doctors don't know half as much as you do yourself if you are intelligent and self-controlled" she wrote in 1922 (qtd. in V. Burnett 401). Her attitude may have had something to do with her two failed marriages to physicians as well as her unsuccessful treatments for depression. In any case, as early as the 1880s, Burnett began to seek alternatives to orthodox medical treatment, including Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Christian Science, a religion founded by New England homeopath Mary Baker Eddy (V. Burnett 127). In 1885, Burnett received a month-long treatment from one of Eddy's students, Anna B. Newman, in Boston (Gerzina 103). She also bought and read Eddy's *Science and Health, with Key to the Scriptures* and attended Christian Science church services (V. Burnett 377).

While Christian Science afforded Burnett intermittent relief, she never officially joined the religion. This baffled Vivian and his wife, who were active members of the faith (Gerzina 298). Vivian wrote in his biography of his mother, "For some reason, despite her sympathy with Christian Science, and her real need of healing, she was not able to accept it wholly, and, though from time to time she turned to it for help, she never absolutely enrolled herself as a Scientist" (377). There are several reasons for Burnett's ambivalence. For instance, she had difficulty convincing herself of Eddy's claim that contagious disease was "engendered solely by human theories" rather than noxious germs (Eddy 220). Burnett also struggled to grasp the Christian Science belief that matter, evil, and suffering are unreal. This was particularly difficult during the last decade of her life when she suffered from undiagnosed colon cancer.

But despite Burnett's reservations about Christian Science, the religion provided comfort during her episodes of depression. Christian Science also helped Burnett cope with the untimely death of her oldest son Lionel in 1890. As Burnett explained to Vivian, "While I could not call myself a Christian Scientist, I believe in its principle because it is the exposition of the pure Christ-spirit applied to the needs of today" (qtd. in Gerzina 241).

It is not surprising that Burnett would feel attracted to Christian Science even if she never officially joined. By 1906, there were 85,000 self-identified Christian Scientists in America. At least as many more Americans were affiliated with related movements such as New Thought (Parker 8). Christian Science was even beginning to make its mark in England where Burnett sometimes resided. Christian Science teaches that reality is spiritual rather than material in nature, and that
evil— including sin, disease, and death—is an illusion. Founder Mary Baker Eddy allegedly discovered this truth when she spontaneously recovered from a severe injury in 1866.

From its beginnings, Christian Science was a deeply antiscientific movement that eschewed mainstream medicine and denied the existence of material reality, especially the body and its ills. The brain was likewise unreal, Eddy assured her followers, since intelligence cannot dwell in material entities: "The brain can give no idea of God's man. . . . Matter is not the organ of infinite Mind" (191). By denying the brain as the organ of mind, Eddy left no room for neurological or psychological explanations for human behavior; she attributed thoughts and emotions to divine "Mind" or "Spirit" alone. Nevertheless, Eddy's writings are permeated by pseudoscientific language. She frequently referred to her belief system as "the Science" and her followers as "Scientists." This rhetorical maneuver suggests that Eddy wanted simultaneously to harness the prestige of science and to negate all other approaches to science (besides her own) as rank materialism.

The movement appealed to Christians of various denominations, many of whom perceived modern science as antagonistic to their beliefs. It also won converts among chronic invalids by promising renewed health through right thinking. Eddy and her followers believed in the near godlike power of human thought to change the universe; positive thinking could create a better reality, while negative thoughts could damage health and human relationships. Christian Scientists also believed in thought transference—the idea that people unconsciously "picked up" on the thoughts of others (Satter 3). Burnett was typical of the movement in her belief that "constant mental communication between minds" could occur even between persons who had never met and lived far apart ("Social Sets of Other Cities" 254).

While both sexes could reap the benefits of Christian Science, the movement was particularly attractive for women, who made up 72% of members in 1906 (Schoepflin 34). Women were drawn to the faith's charismatic female leader and her vision of an androgynous Father-Mother God. Many women built careers as professional Christian Science healers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, establishing their so-called mental healing services as an alternative to mainstream medicine. A typical Christian Science healing consisted of a healer sitting quietly with a patient and meditating on uplifting statements, including repeated denials of the reality of sickness (Satter 57). These meditations could be uttered aloud or silently, in person or at a distance. In the latter case, telepathy would ensure that thoughts reached their intended target. Mental healing
was hailed as a revelation by many nineteenth-century women, particularly neurasthenics who disliked mainstream treatments for nervous illness (58). In fact, Eddy’s *Science and Health* contains an apparent denunciation of the rest cure that was probably aimed at Mitchell (see epigraph).

Given her own negative experiences with mainstream medicine, it makes sense that Burnett would embrace Christian Science and the offshoot movement known as New Thought, which eventually became more popular than Christian Science itself. New Thought teaches that thoughts have the power to shape reality and that people can improve their lives by changing negative thought patterns. The faith spawned such now-familiar ideas as the inner child, daily affirmations, and the power of positive thinking. It also inspired Henry Ford, Oprah Winfrey, and Norman Vincent Peale, among others, and influenced twelve-step groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Today, New Thought rhetoric permeates self-help literature such as *The Secret* (2006), which introduced the power of positive thinking to a new generation and sold millions of copies. New Thought also survives in popular children’s literature written around 1900, including not only *The Secret Garden* but also *The Little Engine that Could* (1930), which remains a best-selling title to this day (Harrington 119). Psychologists speculate that New Thought remains popular in various forms because positive thinking can trigger the placebo effect (126).

New Thought shares many foundational concepts with Christian Science, but its practitioners were not affiliated with Eddy’s Christian Science Mother Church in Boston. Many New Thought leaders were Eddy’s former students who broke from her to establish their own healing practices. They tended to be more flexible about the application of Christian Science principles. For instance, while Eddy acknowledged only the Bible and *Science and Health* as sources of truth, New Thought adherents drew on an amalgam of world religions and esoteric traditions such as Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Transcendentalism, and Swedenborgianism (Harrington 116). Adherents of New Thought were also more willing to cooperate with orthodox medical practitioners, and were somewhat less hostile toward scientific inquiry, including neurological research. For instance, some New Thought authors admitted the existence of the brain and speculated that "unconscious cerebration" (also known as reflex action of the brain) could bring about good or ill health, or play a role in mental telepathy. But despite this greater flexibility, New Thought practitioners often took issue with mainstream medicine, particularly the work of neurologists like Mitchell. Echoing *Science and Health*, New Thought author Annie Call criticized the rest cure as a self-indulgent practice that encouraged unhealthy preoccupation with the body (Parker 85).
According to historian Beryl Satter, it is more accurate to think of Christian Science as a branch of New Thought than the other way around. Both philosophies drew on the thinking of New England homeopath Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and promoted the power of positive thinking. Satter explains, "Today Mary Baker Eddy is seen by non-Christian Scientists as the most successful representative of an obscure late-nineteenth-century Mind Cure or New Thought religious milieu" (5). I adopt this perspective in the remainder of this essay, meaning that I consider Christian Science as a branch of New Thought and Eddy’s *Science and Health* as a prominent New Thought text. Although Eddy worked tirelessly to separate her teachings from those of other New Thought writers such as Emma Curtis Hopkins, Warren Felt Evans, and Ralph Waldo Trine, her protests often drew attention to the marked similarities between her works and those of her rivals.

One important difference between New Thought and Eddy's religion, however, was that New Thought was more flexible in evolving to suit the times. While Christian Science remained a female-centered religion focused on health, New Thought changed its tone significantly around 1900. New Thought literature of the 1880s and 1890s addressed predominantly female audiences and heralded the arrival of a "woman's era" dominated by love, spirituality, and maternal self-sacrifice (Satter 12). By contrast, early twentieth-century New Thought literature began to address male audiences, advocating positive thinking as the key to financial success. To some extent, Burnett's fiction reflects these changes. For instance, the protagonist of *The Dawn of a To-morrow* is a neurasthenic businessman rather than a sick woman. In *The Secret Garden*, meanwhile, a male invalid abandons his sickbed to embrace scientific discovery and muscular Christianity. But despite their central male characters, both novels retain an old-fashioned focus on neurasthenia and female healers. This emphasis suggests that, like many women who had embraced New Thought in the 1880s and 1890s, Burnett remained invested in millennial hopes for a coming "woman's era" (Satter 227).

When Burnett was interviewed by the *New York Times* in 1913, two years after the publication of *The Secret Garden*, she acknowledged the influence of Christian Science and New Thought but denied that any single philosophy provided the key to her fiction or her life. She explained, "I am not a Christian Scientist, I am not an advocate of New Thought, I am not a disciple of the Yogi teaching. I am not a Buddhist, I am not a Mohammedun, I am not a follower of Confucius. Yet I am all of these things" ("Mrs. Burnett" 259). Burnett’s eclectic approach to religion was typical of New Thought followers. As Anne Harrington observes, New Thought "drew variously and generously on a great many esoteric, pantheistic, and occult traditions of the
time," including Theosophy, which in turn borrowed from Eastern religions (116).

While Burnett equivocated about her faith, her readers certainly recognized New Thought messages in her novels. The Dawn of a To-morrow was advertised as "a Charming Bit of New Thought Fiction" when it appeared in 1906 (qtd. in Satter 226). Meanwhile, The Secret Garden was "generally credited with being a Christian Science book" when it was first published, according to Vivian Burnett (377). Modern readers must keep in mind the New Thought context of Burnett's works in order to comprehend her novels' broader themes. For instance, Burnett's attitudes toward gender are impossible to understand without reference to New Thought and the little-known genre of New Thought fiction. The shift from a female to a male protagonist in the second half of The Secret Garden is not merely evidence of Burnett's conservative sexual ideologies, as some critics have alleged. By focusing on Colin instead of Mary at the novel's conclusion, Burnett invokes a convention of New Thought novels, which typically end with the spiritual reform of a refractory male character.

In the remainder of this essay, I read The Dawn of a To-morrow and The Secret Garden as New Thought novels, even though both contain features of other genres as well (such as the romance, the fairy tale, and the gothic novel). The New Thought novel was a well-established genre by 1900, thanks to bestselling fiction by authors such as Helen Van-Anderson, Ursula Gestefeld, and Alice Bunker Stockham. These novels typically feature a female protagonist using New Thought to come to terms with her unhappy marriage, economic vulnerability, and oppressive household responsibilities, though there were numerous variations on this basic plot. Such novels often conclude with the reform of a previously unrepentant male character. Disabled male characters take on special status within this genre, since they were believed to combine the strength and dominance of a man with the moral purity of a woman. While Burnett borrowed much from this generic model, she also innovated it by introducing male protagonists and child healers to a genre that traditionally focused on adult women.

The New Thought context for Burnett's novels is inseparable from her critique of the rest cure. New Thought evolved in part to address women's dissatisfaction with mainstream therapies for nervous ailments, including Mitchell's rest cure. Moreover, many leading New Thought practitioners had initially turned to the "mind cure" to overcome anxiety or depression (Parker x). Although Burnett fits the profile of these New Thought leaders, her fiction was vastly more successful in reaching mainstream readers. Today, The Secret Garden still teaches impressionable children about the power of thought to change circumstances.
New Thought Novels for the New Century

While *The Dawn of a To-morrow* is not widely read today, it was one of Burnett’s most popular works during her lifetime. It was made into a successful play and later, a silent film starring Mary Pickford. The novel’s protagonist, Sir Oliver Holt, is a wealthy English businessman who becomes seriously depressed and contemplates suicide. He is saved from this drastic step by a cheerful band of beggars and thieves, including a twelve-year-old urchin named Glad. Glad and her friends teach Holt that God is omnipresent and death does not exist. The novel and its dramatic adaptations convinced some readers that Burnett was a Christian Scientist. Burnett responded, "Thank goodness, I am not a scientist of any kind" (Burnett, "Mrs. Burnett" 249). But she affirmed that New Thought played a role in her novel. The work was also influenced by Burnett’s own struggles with depression following her two failed marriages (Gerzina 241–42).

In writing *The Dawn of a To-morrow*, Burnett drew on the influential work of American neurologists Mitchell and George Miller Beard. In 1869, Beard introduced the diagnosis of neurasthenia, arguing that symptoms as various as depression, fatigue, anxiety, headaches, and insomnia could be caused by a deficiency or "lack of nerve force" (5). He compared the body of a nervous patient to an insufficiently powerful electric battery (10). Beard went on to boast that neurasthenia was not merely an illness, but a sign of American cultural superiority. He connected overwork with success in commerce and intellectual achievement.

Soon after, Mitchell joined forces with Beard to popularize neurasthenia as a typically American disease that disproportionately afflicted upper-class men. In writings such as *Wear and Tear: or, Hints for the Overworked*, Mitchell focused on the exhausted male brain worker of the middle and upper classes rather than the nervous women he has since become famous for treating. These anxious men felt worn down by "late hours of work, irregular meals bolted in haste away from home, the want of holidays and of pursuits outside of business" (64). For such men, the single-minded pursuit of success was key to their prosperity, yet damaging to their health.

Middle-aged men were at particularly high risk, Mitchell thought. In *Wear and Tear*, he aptly described what we might call a midlife crisis:

Is it any wonder if asylums for the insane gape for such men? There comes to them at last a season of business embarrassment; or, when they get to be fifty or thereabouts, the brain begins to feel the strain, and just as they are thinking, ‘Now we will stop and enjoy ourselves,’ the
brain, which, slave-like, never murmurs until it breaks out into open insurrection, suddenly refuses to work, and the mischief is done. (65)

Except for his Englishness, the protagonist of Burnett's *The Dawn of a To-morrow* could have stepped out of the pages of Mitchell's book. Sir Oliver Holt is a famous businessman whose name "represented the greatest wealth and power in the world of finance and schemes of business" (150). Nonetheless, Holt succumbs at midlife to a crushing depression that no medical intervention can relieve. "There was no wealth on earth that could give me a moment's ease—sleep—hope—life," Holt explains (152). He knows that "physicians would have given a name to his mental and physical condition. He had heard these names often—applied to men the strain of whose lives had been like the strain of his own, and had left them as it had left him—jaded, joyless, breaking things" (7).

While Burnett never uses the word "neurasthenia" to describe Holt's illness, she relies on the language of wear and tear, stress, strain, and breakdown that permeates Beard's and Mitchell's writing on this condition. But Holt has gotten no relief from rest cures, West cures, or other standard remedies, as he explains:10 "Anything else must be better than this—the thing for which there was a scientific name but no healing. He had taken all the drugs, he had obeyed all the medical orders, and here he was after that last hell of a night—dressing himself in a back bedroom of a cheap lodging-house to go out and buy a pistol" (18). While doctors like Beard and Mitchell could provide a name (neurasthenia) and scientific explanation for Holt's condition, they offer no effective remedy for this unfortunate sufferer.

Where the medical community fails Holt, New Thought succeeds in alleviating his depression. After buying a pistol in order to shoot himself, Holt gets lost in the London fog and meets Glad, who introduces him to the drunks, prostitutes, and thieves living in a tenement called Apple-Blossom Court. In this unlikely environment, Holt first encounters the doctrines of New Thought. A former music hall dancer, Miss Jinny Montaubyn, explains to Holt that there is no death and that God is always accessible to believers. "Arst therefore that ye may receive" is a creed she takes quite literally, expecting God to fulfill her every wish (113). Struck by Miss Montaubyn's conviction, Holt decides not to commit suicide. Instead, he gives money to his new friends in Apple-Blossom Court, who use the cash to improve their squalid surroundings.

If Holt's conversion experience sounds unlikely to us, it must have been more convincing (or at least more familiar) to early twentieth-century readers steeped in New Thought. Miss Montaubyn
speaks in familiar New Thought platitudes that are scarcely disguised by her cockney dialect. Her belief in the power of right thinking and the nonexistence of death come straight from Eddy’s *Science and Health*, while her literal interpretation of Mark 11:24, "whatsoever things ye desire, when ye pray, believe that you receive, and ye shall receive," echoes New Thought leader Emma Curtis Hopkins’s reading of this verse (Satter 92). Even Miss Montaubyn’s economic self-sufficiency stems from her positive thinking, which keeps her supplied with food while her neighbors starve.

While Jinny Montaubyn seems like a familiar figure from New Thought literature, *The Dawn of a To-morrow* introduces some new elements into the formulaic genre. By setting her story in a London slum and making her protagonist a wealthy man, Burnett distanced New Thought from its American, female, middle-class roots, perhaps in order to show the religion’s universality. Her choice of a male protagonist, meanwhile, not only hearkens back to Mitchell’s neurasthenic businessmen of the 1870s, but also looks forward to expanded audiences for New Thought literature. Titans of industry like Andrew Carnegie and Henry Ford numbered among the many prominent men who embraced this faith in the first decades of the twentieth century.

While Sir Oliver Holt’s wealth invites comparison with Carnegie, success in commerce is not enough for him. Two female characters, Glad and Jinny Montaubyn, must show him the way to achieve health and happiness. In these respects, Holt’s story deviates from twentieth-century New Thought literature on financial success and more closely resembles earlier New Thought narratives in which the sick and despondent turn to female healers. In this strain of New Thought, converts embraced traditionally feminine virtues such as love, family, and maternal self-sacrifice.

Holt’s experiences follow the latter model. For instance, Holt learns the pleasures of selfless giving when he sees what good his wealth could do in Apple-Blossom Court. In giving away his money, Holt follows the dictates of Eddy, who taught her followers to "dissipate . . . fatigue in doing good" (79). Holt even acquires a surrogate family at the novel’s conclusion by taking in a prostitute and abandoned baby. He ends the novel happier and more in tune with his feminine side, recognizing that financial success alone cannot ensure personal satisfaction. He acknowledges that male doctors can explain his symptoms scientifically but cannot help him recover. It is up to female-centered religions like New Thought to bring about a cure.

Despite her businessman protagonist, then, Burnett remains dedicated to the woman- and health-centered variety of New Thought popular in the late nineteenth century. But curiously, she includes two
female healers in *The Dawn of a To-morrow* when one might conceivably suffice. This doubling appears again in *The Secret Garden*, when the child-heroine Mary Lennox and the loving mother-figure Susan Sowerby together nurse the novel’s invalid males back to health. In each novel, Burnett pairs an older woman with a precocious female child-healer. While the adult female healer is a standard trope of New Thought literature, the inspired girl-child seems new to the genre.

Burnett’s child healers call to mind the discourse of the inner child that emerged in New Thought, beginning with Eddy and continuing with Hopkins, the leading New Thought teacher of the 1880s and 1890s. Eddy viewed children metaphorically as “[t]he spiritual thoughts and representatives of Life, Truth, and Love” (582). Expanding on Eddy’s teachings, Hopkins encouraged her mostly female followers to meditate and practice daily affirmations in order to fortify the divine within themselves, which she termed the "God-Self" or "Man Child." The term "Man Child" comes from Revelations 12:1–5, in which the "woman" brings forth "a male child" who will "rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (Satter 88). Hopkins identified this child as a masculine, dominant inner self within the passive, feminine individual. Drawing on this inner Man Child would give women godlike powers, Hopkins wrote.

The New Thought discourse of the inner child drew in turn on earlier sources, including Wordsworthian conceptions of the divine child and mid-Victorian male fantasies about female children. If nineteenth-century women could so easily imagine an opposite-sex, child version of themselves, perhaps this is because of a parallel tradition in which Victorian men saw themselves in young girls. Catherine Robson has described how mid-Victorian male writers including John Ruskin, Charles Dickens, and Lewis Carroll saw girls as representatives of "the true essence of childhood" (3). Relationships with girls helped such men reconnect with their lost childhood selves. This makes sense because middle- and upper-class Victorian men spent their earliest years in the feminized realm of the nursery, in company with their sisters, before heading off to male-dominated public schools. They looked back on their early childhoods as an Edenic lost realm and idealized the girls they associated with this time. Such idealized girl children in literature include the eponymous heroine of Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Little Nell in Dickens’s *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), and many others.11

Glad’s relationship with Holt bears some resemblance to this paradigm. Glad’s naïveté and youthful good spirits counteract Holt’s jaded pessimism, perhaps reminding him of his bygone youth. But in Robson’s model, middle- and upper-class men idolize young girls of their own social station. Glad, a beggar who alludes to her likely
future as a prostitute, cannot fully embody the innocence and purity typical of this pattern.

Why, then, did Burnett position Glad as a foil for Holt? The answer lies in his identity as neurasthenic, for neurasthenia was emphatically a disease of the middle and upper classes, specifically, brain workers who succumbed to the pressures of intellectual labor. In *Wear and Tear*, Mitchell wrote, "I am talking chiefly of the crowded portions of our country, of our great towns, and especially of their upper classes . . . the physical worker is being better and better paid and less and less hardly tasked, while just the reverse obtains in increasing ratios for those who live by the lower form of brain-work" (10). Mitchell's definition of the neurasthenic virtually excluded lower-class patients, particularly manual laborers. Doctors tended to attribute the nervous complaints of the poor to other causes, such as hard work, childbearing, or hysteria (Gijswijt-Hofstra 8). By virtue of her origins, then, Glad would be considered practically immune to neurasthenia. She is able to help Holt precisely because she is so removed from his world of "brain-work." Glad also displays wisdom beyond her years that aligns her with the inner child of New Thought.

In *The Secret Garden*, Burnett continues the New Thought emphasis on the inner child by introducing a cast of child characters. But not all of them possess uncanny wisdom. The novel's protagonist, ten-year-old Mary Lennox, is a spoiled orphan who hails from India. The hot Indian climate has ruined her appetite and her appearance, as the narrator explains: "[h]er hair was yellow, and her face was yellow because she had been born in India and had always been ill in one way or another" (3). When her parents die of cholera, Mary is sent to the Yorkshire countryside to live with her hunch-backed uncle, Archibald Craven, at Misselthwaite Manor, "a house with a hundred rooms, nearly all shut up and with their doors locked" (12). In this unlikely Gothic setting, Mary slowly regains her health through gardening, socializing, and exercising outdoors. Once she recovers, Mary helps to cure her uncle and her invalid cousin, Colin.

Like Glad in *The Dawn of a To-morrow*, Mary has a salutary influence on neurasthenic males, helping them to discover their inner wisdom and healing power. By the novel's conclusion, however, Colin himself seems to have taken over the role of the inner child initially vested in Mary. The novel's shift from a female to male healer parallels a larger transition taking place in Edwardian New Thought, which was evolving from a woman-centered faith focused on healing to a male-centered religion of commercial success. Accordingly, the novel's conclusion centers not on Mary but on Colin, who has transformed from a bedridden hypochondriac into an ambitious young athlete, lecturer, and "Scientific Discoverer" (172).
By contrast, the opening chapters focus on Mary, whose talents lie in healing and storytelling, rather than the male-dominated realms of science and commerce. In some respects, the history of Mary Lennox parallels that of Mary Baker Eddy, who died in 1910, just a year before the publication of *The Secret Garden*. Eddy suffered years of sickness before undergoing a spontaneous healing in 1866. This healing, combined with the teachings of her mentor, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, became the basis for the creed outlined in *Science and Health* (Harrington 113–14). Like her namesake, Mary Lennox learns how to heal herself and applies those lessons when she begins to cure others.

Mary's own cure takes place in the titular secret garden, which embodies a central metaphor of New Thought. Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*, considered to be the first New Thought bestseller, contains the parable of a "Soul Garden" tended first by a wise man, then by a foolish one (20). This garden consists of "a beautiful lotus pond" that is "supplied with water from a reservoir in the foothills" (18–19). The garden's wise owner leaves open the gate connecting the lotus pond to the mountain reservoir. While the water is allowed to flow freely from this source, the garden is a continual source of pleasure to all who visit. This wise man then rents his estate to a more "practical" man who shuts the gate connecting the reservoir to the pond and puts up a "No Trespassing" sign (21). Predictably, the pond withers. This story is of course a metaphor. The life-giving water of the reservoir represents God's infinite supply of goodness, to which we must remain connected in order to be whole.

Like the soul garden in Trine's parable, the secret garden brings health and life to its visitors, but only when it is properly tended. Ten years prior to Mary's arrival at Misselthwaite Manor, Archibald Craven's wife died following an accident in the garden. Devastated by this loss, Craven locked the door to the walled garden and buried the key. Craven thus resembles the practical renter who closes the gate to the reservoir and puts up a "No Trespassing" sign. By contrast, Mary resembles the wise owner who opens up the garden to positive influences and invites visitors in. Under her care, the garden transforms from a dead place into a verdant paradise, with "roses . . . rising out of the grass, tangled round the sun-dial, [and] wreathing the tree-trunks" (137).

Several elements of Mary's garden hold special significance according to New Thought. By the late 1890s, some New Thought writers had begun to stress the aliveness and intelligence of all matter. For instance, Helen Wilmans stressed that every "atom in the universe had power to think. . . . Animals think; plants think; even crystals think" (qtd. in Satter 168). This animism surfaces in *The
Secret Garden, particularly in the novel’s descriptions of intelligent animals and willful plants. The robin who makes friends with Mary resembles a "real person—only nicer than any other person in the world" (40). The robin is soon joined by a fox, a crow, a lamb, and other creatures tamed by Dickon, a peasant boy who befriends Mary. Meanwhile daffodils are compared to "tiny, pale green points . . . to be seen in cleared places, looking twice as cheerful as they had looked before when the grass and weeds had been smothering them" (48). The personification of nonhuman life in The Secret Garden chimes with early twentieth-century New Thought, which emphasized the divine forces animating nature.

Even the garden’s roses have special significance for New Thought. Eddy’s Science and Health contains a striking passage about diseases and allergies, including what she calls "rose cold": "In old times who ever heard of dyspepsia, cerebro-spinal meningitis, hay-fever, and rose-cold? What an abuse of natural beauty to say that a rose, the smile of God, can produce suffering. The joy of its presence, its beauty and fragrance, should uplift the thought, and dissuade any sense of fear or fever" (175). In The Secret Garden, Colin avoids roses due to his fear of "rose cold" (83). As servant Martha Sowerbery explains, one of Colin's worst hysterical fits was occasioned by a trip to Misselthwaite's rose gardens, where he began to sneeze and "cried himself into a fever an' was ill all night" (83). Colin's eventual recovery involves spending time in Mary's rose garden where he suffers no allergic symptoms and even plants his very own "rose in a pot" (134). Fittingly, roses serve as an index of Colin's transformation from hypochondriac shut-in to healthy lover of the outdoors. Roses were one of Eddy's favorite flowers as well as a source of delight for Burnett, who famously grew her own rose garden at Maytham, her rented English estate in Kent.

In championing a life of outdoor activity and fellowship in lieu of bed rest and isolation, Burnett develops her most effective critique of the rest cure. Colin serves as an object lesson. When Mary first encounters Colin, he is a bedridden invalid every bit as querulous as Mitchell's hysterical female patients. He rarely leaves his bed, refuses to see visitors, and throws fits when he does not get his way. At the root of Colin's hysteria is his profound terror of illness and dying. He is particularly afraid of becoming a hunchback like his father. "If I live I may be a hunchback, but I shan't live," Colin explains. "My father hates to think I may be like him" (74). Colin is miserable until Mary examines his back and convinces him there is no abnormality. His extraordinary suggestibility brings to mind Eddy's teaching that illness stems from "fear of the disease and from the image brought before the mind" rather than physical causes (196).
Colin's physician exacerbates his illness by making him morbidly preoccupied with his symptoms. Dr. Craven tells Colin that he "must not forget that he was ill; he must not forget that he was very easily tired" (88). Much like Mitchell, Dr. Craven encourages his patient to eat more and rest in bed. While this counsel sounds harmless enough, the physician's intentions are suspect. As Archibald Craven's cousin, Dr. Craven stands to inherit Misselthwaite Manor if Colin dies and thus has little incentive to help Colin recover.

The servants at Misselthwaite Manor suspect that Dr. Craven is doing Colin harm by coddling him. Martha suggests that by "keepin' him lyin' down and not lettin' him walk" (82), Dr. Craven has prevented Colin's back from getting stronger. Her opinion is confirmed by a "grand doctor" who comes from London to consult on Colin's case (86). This doctor declares that "there'd been too much medicine and too much lettin'[g] him have his own way" (82). He also believes that "the lad might live if he would make up his mind to it" (86). Colin's case seemingly confirms the warnings of New Thought writers like Eddy and Call, who argued that the rest cure encouraged unhealthy preoccupation with bodily disease.

While Colin's disease is caused by his belief that he is ill, his cure consists of behaving like a healthy, normal boy of his age. Mary encourages Colin to visit the rose garden, where he overcomes his previous fear of the outdoors and discovers that his legs and back are perfectly well. Gradually he begins walking, exercising, and gardening with the help of Mary and Dickon. As Eddy might have predicted, Colin's rapid improvement follows on the change in his beliefs about illness. Burnett's narrator relates, "[h]e had made himself believe that he was going to get well, which was really more than half the battle" (143). Meanwhile, Colin's father, Archibald Craven, learns to accept the death of his wife by revisiting the secret garden she had once loved. In the forgotten rose garden tended by his son and niece, Craven realizes for the first time that Colin is neither crippled nor doomed to an early death.

In the course of his rapid transformation, Colin changes from a hysterical, effeminate invalid into a paragon of youthful male virtue and muscular Christianity. He develops an interest in science, sports, and weightlifting. He even becomes a spiritual leader of sorts, guiding Mary, Dickon, and the gardener, Ben Weatherstaff, in a recitation of the Doxology. Some critics have alleged that the novel's shift in focus from Mary to Colin demonstrates Burnett's conservative gender values, or a wish-fulfillment fantasy about her deceased son, Lionel, coming back to life. But there are other ways to construe the narrative's shift toward Colin that take into account the generic conventions of the New Thought novel.
For instance, the typical New Thought novel of the late nineteenth century concluded with the reform of a refractory male character. This character was sometimes, but not always, the protagonist's husband. In Helen Van Anderson's influential New Thought novel, *Journal of a Live Woman* (1895), heroine Victoria True convinces her husband to give up drinking; meanwhile, in Ursula Gestefeld's *The Woman Who Dares* (1892), protagonist Murva Kroom's estranged husband returns and begs her to lead him to new spiritual heights. These novels often feature a crippled man or boy as a paragon of human virtue (Satter 139). For New Thought writers, handicapped men were uniquely capable of embodying all positive traits valorized by their philosophy, including maternal self-sacrifice, feminine chastity, and male strength of will. Dr. Alice Bunker Stockham and Lida Hood Talbot's utopian New Thought novel *Koradine Letters* (1893), for instance, features a beautiful blind boy, Tommy Merton, as the romantic counterpart to its idealized heroine, Koradine. Tommy unites the willpower of a man with the purity of a New Thought heroine, giving him near godlike status (Satter 142). As a male who is both disabled and eventually reformed, Colin plays a critical role within Burnett's New Thought novel.

Colin's triumph is also a sign of shifting cultural norms, both within and outside of the New Thought movement. As Robson explains, mid-Victorian authors saw inspired girl-children as repositories of innocence and nostalgia for a bygone era. By the Edwardian era, however, girls could no longer convincingly inhabit this role. Due to late Victorian journalistic exposés of child prostitution and poverty, such as W. T. Stead's "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (1885), British readers had become all too aware of the hardships faced by real girls, as opposed to their idealized literary representatives. Burnett's Glad, who alludes to her likely future as a prostitute, demonstrates how compromised this vision of idealized girlhood had become by the Edwardian era. The focus of the new era was on the boy, Robson explains: "for figures as diverse as J. M. Barrie, Rudyard Kipling, Baden Powell, and Sigmund Freud, the boy returned from long obscurity to be childhood's supreme representative for the twentieth century" (193).

*The Secret Garden*, which shifts focus from Mary to Colin as the story progresses, demonstrates this cultural sea change wherein the boy supplanted the girl as a symbol of childhood innocence. The midpoint of this transition is represented by Dickon, the androgynous twelve-year-old peasant boy who dominates the novel's central chapters. He helps Mary and Colin discover their love of nature before he, like Mary, largely fades from view at the novel's conclusion. Dickon has been described as a Pan figure and an unlikely mother
surrogate who teaches his two young friends how to nurture plants and animals. His fey qualities and his maternal side point to his transitional status; Dickon is neither the idealized girl-child of the mid-Victorian era nor the triumphantly masculine boy of the early twentieth century.

In an early draft of the novel, Dickon was lame and used crutches, which might indicate his exalted status within the New Thought novel. While the final draft restores Dickon's ability to walk, he retains the idealized, androgynous aura that New Thought followers associated with disabled men. These details suggests that initially, Burnett had not decided which of the novel's three child-figures would serve as her focal point. Indeed, it is not clear that she ever completely made up her mind. An early review in the New York Bookman, for instance, lamented the difficulty of identifying the hero of the story, a point reiterated by recent critics. While Mary dominates the early chapters and Colin takes over at the conclusion, Dickon is arguably the most arresting character of the novel's central chapters. Thus, the role of inspired child healer filled by Glad in The Dawn of a To-morrow is shared between three characters in The Secret Garden. This potentially confusing split is Burnett's way of negotiating the changing cultural meanings placed on male and female children in the Edwardian era.

If the proliferation of child healers in The Secret Garden suggests the complexity of Edwardian gender constructs, it also shows how New Thought enabled followers to manipulate these roles. Mary's strong identification with Colin, and her ability to live vicariously through his athletic and scientific exploits, suggests one way in which New Thought helped women circumvent traditional roles. More impressively, some female New Thought adherents used their faith to gain income as professional healers or to evade cultural expectations placed on women, including compulsory heterosexuality and childbearing (Satter 17). Such a philosophy had an obvious appeal for Burnett as a successful woman writer in a male-dominated profession. The New Thought bias of The Secret Garden may also explain the novel's perennial appeal for women, who were the primary advocates of the faith in its early years and who remain avid consumers of self-help literature derived from its teachings.

Female readers may have also responded to the novel's implicit critique of Mitchell's rest cure, which is inseparable from its New Thought philosophy. Like many women interested in New Thought, Burnett suffered from nervous illness and lost faith in mainstream therapies such as the rest cure. So she offered readers a different sort of "cure." In Burnett's novels, girls heal hysterical males by engaging them in activity, socialization, and positive thinking. While Glad
shows Holt that happiness comes through friendships and charitable giving, Mary teaches Colin the joys of wholesome outdoor activity. Neither Holt nor Colin benefits from medical care or enforced inactivity. This makes sense, given Burnett's interest in Christian Science. Like Eddy, Burnett suggested that the rest cure encouraged morbid preoccupation with the body and its symptoms.

Burnett and her novels exemplify a broader phenomenon occurring on both sides of the Atlantic at this time: educated women eschewing conventional medicine in favor of faith healing movements such as New Thought. These women had legitimate complaints about the mainstream medical practitioners of their day. Nineteenth-century neurologists held essentialist views of women that interfered with their ability to treat female patients with fairness and dignity. *The Dawn of a To-morrow* and *The Secret Garden* vividly demonstrate the appeal that New Thought must have had for women seeking new cures for mental ills along with a degree of autonomy in their medical decision-making. By packaging her persuasive message about healing in a delightful children's story, Burnett ensured that it would be read and internalized by future generations.

**Notes**

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1. Burnett's biographers, Vivian Burnett and Gretchen Gerzina, have noted the importance of Christian Science in Burnett's life and works. Gerzina's Norton edition of *The Secret Garden* helpfully includes information about Christian Science and New Thought in the "Backgrounds and Contexts" section 179–261. But neither V. Burnett nor Gerzina discusses Burnett's interest in these spiritual traditions in great detail. Michael McCarthy explores the impact of Spiritualism, Theosophy, and New Thought on *The Secret Garden*, but he relates Burnett's interest in these movements to her son Lionel's untimely death rather than exploring the author's attitudes toward mainstream medicine, as I do here.

2. During the winter of 1877–78, Burnett was working on the novel *Haworth's*. See Gerzina 81. This is probably the manuscript whose progress is described here.
3. Medical literature suggests a correlation between handwriting changes and bipolar disorder. See Tigges et al. Generally, patients in a depressed mental state write more neatly than those in a manic state.

4. Both of the rest cures described above were prescribed for a combination of physical and mental ailments. Burnett's 1902 stay in the Fishkill Landing Sanitarium was intended to treat neuritis (nerve pain) in her face as well as nervous prostration. By 1919 Burnett was suffering from nervous symptoms and undiagnosed colon cancer. It was fairly typical for rest cures to be prescribed for a combination of physical and mental symptoms. Moreover, neurasthenia was thought to encompass numerous physical symptoms, such as migraines and indigestion. See Beard 7–8.

5. Although I have yet to find figures on the prevalence of Christian Science in the United Kingdom, Eddy's *Science and Health* contains several testimonials from Christian Scientists residing in England and Ireland. See chapter 18 of Eddy, titled "Fruitage" 600–700.

6. See, for instance, Emma Curtis Hopkins, *Class Lessons*, 1888: "One who works hard to solve a problem in mathematics, but cannot get the right calculation and result, will if he labors long enough, set the mechanical action of the brain to work, and while his conscious intellect is asleep or roving elsewhere, the action of calculation will keep up, and by and by, get the answer for him. Physiologists call this 'unconscious cerebration.' Health can be set to coming in the same way, by persistent thoughts setting toward health" (102). Warren Felt Evans, meanwhile, hypothesized that "the nervous system is the intermediate organism through which the mind acts upon and controls the body" (11). Yet, many other New Thought writers followed Eddy's lead in denying the reality of the body, including the brain and nervous system.

7. On conservative sexual ideologies in *The Secret Garden* see, for instance, Keyser 10–11.

8. This paragraph draws on Satter, chapter 4.

9. There were some New Thought novels written specifically for children such as Dr. Alice Bunker Stockham and Lida Hood Talbot's *Koradine: A Prophetic Story* (1893) and Helen Van Anderson's *The Story of Teddy* (1893) and *Carroll's Conversion* (1904). But by and large, these books were didactic and focused on improving children's behavior. Burnett's works, by contrast, feature child characters as healers in their own right.

10. On Mitchell's West Cure for nervous men, see Stiles, "Go Rest, Young Man."

11. For a full account, see Robson 3–15. Robson points out that while pedophilia could be a component of the paradigm she describes—Carroll's obsession with Alice Liddell comes to mind—she is primarily interested in "the cultural origins" of men's fascination with little girls rather than sexual aspects of this relationship (10).
12. Within New Thought circles, there was considerable debate about the nature of matter and whether it was alive or dead, real or unreal, masculine or feminine. See Satter 9.

13. On Colin as hysterical, see Marquis, and Foster and Simons 335.


15. For examples of these readings, see Koppes 199 and Druley 61.

16. For more on this early draft, see Rector 186–99.

17. For recent examples, see Lundin 280 and Bixler 292.

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