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Money and Politics in the Land of Oz

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QUENTIN P. TAYLOR

“**T**he story of ‘The Wonderful Wizard of Oz’ was written solely to pleasure children of today” (Dighe 2002, 42). So wrote L. Frank Baum in the introduction to his popular children’s story published in 1900. As fertile as his imagination was, Baum could hardly have conceived that his “modernized fairy tale” would attain immortality when it was adapted to the silver screen forty years later. Though not a smash hit at the time of its release, *The Wizard of Oz* soon captured the hearts of the movie-going public, and it has retained its grip ever since. With its stirring effects, colorful characters, and memorable music (not to mention Judy Garland’s dazzling performance), the film has delighted young and old alike for three generations. Yet, as everyone knows, *The Wizard of Oz* is more than just another celluloid classic; it has become a permanent part of American popular culture.

Oz as Allegory

Is *Oz*, however, merely a children’s story, as its author claimed? For a quarter of a century after its film debut, no one seemed to think otherwise. This view would change completely when an obscure high school teacher published an essay in *American Quarterly* claiming that Baum’s charming tale concealed a clever allegory on the Populist movement, the agrarian revolt that swept across the Midwest in the 1890s. In an ingenuous act of imaginative scholarship, Henry M. Littlefield linked the characters and the story line of the *Oz* tale to the political landscape of the Mauve Decade. The discovery was little less than astonishing: Baum’s children’s story was in fact a full-

Quentin P. Taylor is an assistant professor of history and political science at Rogers State University, Claremore, Oklahoma.

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blown “parable on populism,” a “vibrant and ironic portrait” of America on the eve of the new century (Littlefield 1964, 50).

In supporting this thesis, Littlefield drew on Baum’s experience as a journalist before he wrote *Oz*. As editor of a small newspaper in Aberdeen, South Dakota, Baum had written on politics and current events in the late 1880s and early 1890s, a period that coincided with the formation of the Populist Party. Littlefield also indicated that Baum was sympathetic to the Populist movement, supported William Jennings Bryan in the election of 1896, and, though not an activist, consistently voted for Democratic candidates. (In 1896, the Populists joined the Democrats in backing Bryan’s bid for the presidency.) Finally, Littlefield noted Baum’s penchant for political satire as evidenced by his second *Oz* tale, which lampoons feminism and the suffragette movement.

In coupling Baum’s political and literary proclivities, Littlefield built on the work of Martin Gardner and Russel B. Nye, who were among the first to take a serious interest in “The Royal Historian of Oz.” According to Nye, Baum all but admitted that his writings contained a veiled subtext, confessing his desire to pen stories that would “bear the stamp of our times and depict the progressive fairies of the day” (Gardiner and Nye 1957, 1). For Littlefield, Baum’s revelation appeared decisive. Yet even without it, the numerous parallels and analogies between the *Oz* story and contemporary politics were “far too consistent to be coincidental” (1964, 58). And although the parable remains in a “minor key” and is not allowed to interfere with the fantasy, “the author’s allegorical intent seems clear”—that is, to produce “a gentle and friendly Midwestern critique of the Populist rationale” (50, 58, 57).

The reaction to Littlefield was, predictably, mixed. Scholars and teachers, who saw the allegorical reading (as Littlefield himself had) as a useful “teaching mechanism,” tended to be enthusiastic. Many among the *Oz* faithful, however, were not impressed, including Baum’s great-grandson, who curtly dismissed the parable thesis as “insane” (Moyer 1998, 46). Although neither side produced much evidence, Littlefield’s interpretation gained widespread currency in academic circles, and by the 1980s it had assumed the proportions of an “urban legend,” as history textbooks and scholarly works on Populism paid homage to the *Oz* allegory.

The contention that *Oz* is a cleverly crafted political parable reached its apogee in the erudite pages of the *Journal of Political Economy*. In an article entitled “The ‘Wizard of Oz’ as a Monetary Allegory” (1990), Hugh Rockoff examined the analogies between Baum’s use of imagery and the monetary politics of the Populist era. In the book version of *Oz*, Dorothy treads the Yellow Brick Road in *silver* shoes, not in ruby slippers. Silver shoes on a golden road? A key plank in the Populist platform was a demand for “free silver”—that is, the “free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold” at a fixed ratio of sixteen to one. Populists and other free-silver proponents advocated unlimited coinage of the white metal in order to inflate the money supply, thus making it easier for cash-strapped farmers and small businessmen to borrow money and pay off debts. At the Democratic National Convention in 1896, the assembled delegates nominated William Jennings Bryan, an avid supporter of free silver, for presi-

dent. The Bryan nomination created a split in the Democratic Party, as gold-standard delegates bolted the convention. When the Populists convened two weeks later, they decided to endorse Bryan, putting all their reformist eggs in the free-silver basket. When Bryan was roundly defeated by the “sound money” Republican William McKinley, the Populist Party, which had considerable strength in the Midwest and South, fell into rapid decline. By 1900, when Bryan was again defeated by McKinley, Populism already had one foot in the political grave.

According to Rockoff, the monetary politics of the 1896 campaign, which divided the electorate into “silverites” and “goldbugs,” supplied the central backdrop for Baum’s allegorical adaptation. Incorporating the analogies developed by Littlefield and others, and adding a few of his own, Rockoff provided a detailed and sustained analysis of the political and economic issues symbolically refracted in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

With Rockoff, the allegorical interpretation reached a peak of sophistication, yet its subsequent decline was no less precipitous than that of the Populist Party itself. In 1991, Michael Hearn, a leading Baum scholar, published a letter in the *New York Times* that demolished Gardner and Nye’s claim (based on interviews with Baum’s son and biographer) that Baum was a Democrat and a Bryan supporter. Indeed, the record shows that Baum was neither. His editorials for the *Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer* expressed support for Republican candidates and criticized the nascent Populist movement. Later, during the 1896 campaign, Baum published a poem championing McKinley and his economic policies: “Our merchants won’t be trembling / At the silverites’ dissembling / When McKinley gets the chair!” Further evidence, from Baum’s later books and activities, indicates that he was, if not a regular Republican, then certainly no Democrat or Populist.

On the basis of these revelations, Hearn found “no evidence that Baum’s story is in any way a Populist allegory,” and he concluded that the Littlefield reading “has no basis in fact” (1992). In response, Littlefield conceded that “there is no basis in fact to consider Baum a supporter of turn-of-the-century Populist ideology,” adding that whatever Baum’s intentions were in writing *Oz*, he kept them to himself (1992). The *Oz* purists could only rejoice.

The postmortem on the symbolic reading of Baum soon followed. In “The Rise and Fall of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as a ‘Parable on Populism,’” David Parker recounted the curious interpretive history of the first *Oz* book. Although bowing to the evidence, Parker attempted to salvage the allegorical interpretation as “a useful pedagogical device . . . [for] illustrating a number of Gilded Age issues” (1994, 58), but he suggested that other interpretations might be “just as compelling” (59). Given its rich imagery and suggestive plot, Baum’s story, Parker concluded, can be “anything we want it to be—including, if we wish, a parable on Populism” (59).

This judgment would seem to be the final word on what is certainly one of the most fascinating literary puzzles of the twentieth century. On the surface, this verdict is confirmed by Ranjit S. Dighe in a recent edition of Baum’s immortal tale. In *The*

Historian's Wizard of Oz: Reading L. Frank Baum's Classic as a Political and Monetary Allegory, Dighe concludes that the story "is almost certainly not a conscious Populist allegory," but, like Parker, he believes "the book *works*" as one (2002, 8).

Really the Last Word?

This "solution" to the riddle may have been intended to pull the curtain on a well-worn debate, but it only begs the question: If *Oz* "works" so well as an allegory, why discount the likelihood that it was *meant* as an allegory? Ironically, Dighe provides ample circumstantial evidence that it was. First, Baum was, if not politically active, then undoubtedly well informed. As a journalist and editor, he was familiar with the political events and controversies of the day, and he commented liberally on a number of them. Second, all agree that Baum injected political satire into some of his later works, including the 1902 stage production of *Oz*, which parodied the Populists, among others. A final and perhaps more telling sign is found in Baum's enigmatic personality. Friends and family members have attested to his penchant for jesting and playful dissimulation. "Everything he said had to be taken with at least a half-pound of salt," recalled one acquaintance (qtd. in Dighe 2002, 8). Similarly, a nephew noted Baum's habit of "tell[ing] wild tales, with a perfectly straight face, and earnestly, as though he really believed them himself" (qtd. in Dighe 2002, 8). There is also an anecdote that Baum spoke on behalf of a Republican candidate on one day, then gave the same speech in favor of a Democrat on another day (Hearn 1992).

Taken together, these facts suggest that if anyone was likely to create a political satire out of an innocent children's story, it was L. Frank Baum (Koupal 2001). But Baum was a sophisticated satirist, who most likely understood that the most effective satire is guileless and keeps the reader guessing as to the author's true intent (Koupal 1989). This sophistication explains the disclaimer in the introduction to *Oz*: the claim that the book was "written solely to pleasure children of today." Dighe suggests that this "odd disclaimer" may have been a "hint" that Baum intended to conceal a message in the text (2002, 42). Indeed, to do so was fully consistent with Baum's personality and later writings. Why else claim that a children's book's was "written solely" for children unless the author wished to imply just the opposite? In light of the obvious parallels and correspondences in *Oz*, the disclaimer stands revealed for what it truly is: the preliminary staging of an elaborate jest. That most readers did not "get it" only added to its success, for Baum, a connoisseur of the preposterous, nourished the pleasures of the private joke (see William Leach's introduction to Baum [1900] 1991).

With these considerations in mind, the alleged "triumph" of the revisionist view is not merely a qualified and tentative victory, but no victory at all. First, Littlefield and his supporters never claimed to have proved that Baum wrote a deliberate, conscious parable. True, Littlefield did propose to "demonstrate" the presence of "a symbolic allegory" in *Oz*, but he conceded that his specific findings were "theoretical" (50, 58). Second, he can hardly be blamed for the erroneous details

regarding Baum's political proclivities. More important, Baum's politics, which were highly eclectic, have little bearing on the question of whether or not *Oz* contains a symbolic allegory. Littlefield's critics often present Baum's quasi-Republican and anti-Populist credentials as "proof" that he could not have intended to write a Populist parable. The assumption rests on the claim that he interpreted *Oz* in a *pro*-Populist vein, yet Littlefield read Baum's allegory as a "critique of the Populist rationale," not as a defense. Finally, Littlefield recognized that the principal value of the allegorical interpretation was pedagogical; the author's intent was only a secondary consideration.

The revisionists clearly have overstated their case, and observers such as Parker and Dighe have conceded too much. Even Michael Gessel, the skeptical editor of the Baum newsletter, admits that "*The Wizard* can be viewed as a political tale" (1992). Gessel's admission underscores the difficulty of simply dismissing the allegorical interpretation or ascribing it to Baum's "subconscious." Despite Dighe's own skepticism, his recent edition, which lists virtually every alleged political-cum-monetary analogy in *Oz*, only adds further weight to the contention that Littlefield was essentially right. Although some of the parallels are more tenuous than others, many are so obvious and palpable as to defy coincidence. Their cumulative effect—not only in number, but in coherence—warrants a strong presumption that Baum's fairy tale contains a conscious political subtext. In conjunction with what is known about Baum and his oeuvre, it is reasonable to conclude that *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was in large part intended along the lines Littlefield laid down forty years ago. The "riddle" of *Oz* is not such a riddle after all; it is "solved" in much the manner one identifies a duck, on the basis of its attributes.

The question of Baum's intention in writing *Oz*, though of interest to the literary sleuth, is clearly secondary to the allegory itself. Now that the numerous elements of Baum's parable have been gathered and set down, it may appear that little remains to be said. Perhaps nothing original or groundbreaking remains undiscovered, yet because Dighe presents these elements as annotations to Baum's text, we still lack an integrated, expository account that incorporates all the relevant metaphors and analogies. Acknowledging in advance my debt to Littlefield, Rockoff, and Dighe, I attempt to give such an account here. For purposes of coherence and clarity, I take the allegorical reading for granted and generally avoid qualifying language. A number of analogies are admittedly subject to more than one interpretation, and I make no claim that Baum himself intended each one. Rather, I have adopted (and occasionally embellished) those that fit the Populist parable best.

Dorothy (and Toto) of Kansas

Dorothy, the protagonist of the story, represents an individualized ideal of the American people. She is each of us at our best—kind but self-respecting, guileless but level-headed, wholesome but plucky. She is akin to Everyman, or, in modern parlance, "the

girl next door.” Dorothy lives in Kansas, where virtually everything—the treeless prairie, the sun-beaten grass, the paint-stripped house, even Aunt Em and Uncle Henry—is a dull, drab, lifeless gray. This grim depiction reflects the forlorn condition of Kansas in the late 1880s and early 1890s, when a combination of scorching droughts, severe winters, and an invasion of grasshoppers reduced the prairie to an uninhabitable wasteland. The result for farmers and all who depended on agriculture for their livelihood was devastating. Many ascribed their misfortune to the natural elements, called it quits, and moved on. Others blamed the hard times on bankers, the railroads, and various middlemen who seemed to profit at the farmers’ expense. Angry victims of the Kansas calamity also took aim at the politicians, who often appeared indifferent to their plight. Around these economic and political grievances, the Populist movement coalesced.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s, Populism spread rapidly throughout the Midwest and into the South, but Kansas was always the site of its most popular and radical elements. In 1890, Populist candidates began winning seats in state legislatures and Congress, and two years later Populists in Kansas gained control of the lower house of the state assembly, elected a Populist governor, and sent a Populist to the U.S. Senate. The twister that carries Dorothy to Oz symbolizes the Populist cyclone that swept across Kansas in the early 1890s. Baum was not the first to use the metaphor. Mary E. Lease, a fire-breathing Populist orator, was often referred to as the “Kansas Cyclone,” and the free-silver movement was often likened to a political whirlwind that had taken the nation by storm. Although Dorothy does not stand for Lease, Baum did give her (in the stage version) the last name “Gale”—a further pun on the cyclone metaphor.

The name of Dorothy’s canine companion, Toto, is also a pun, a play on *tectotaler*. Prohibitionists were among the Populists’ most faithful allies, and the Populist hope William Jennings Bryan was himself a “dry.” As Dorothy embarks on the Yellow Brick Road, Toto trots “soberly” behind her, just as the Prohibitionists soberly followed the Populists.

The Baum Witch Project

When Dorothy’s twister-tossed house comes to rest in Oz, it lands squarely on the wicked Witch of the East, killing her instantly. The startled girl emerges from the abode to find herself in a strange land of remarkable beauty, whose inhabitants, the diminutive Munchkins, rejoice at the death of the Witch. The Witch represents eastern financial-industrial interests and their gold-standard political allies, the main targets of Populist venom. Midwestern farmers often blamed their woes on the nefarious practices of Wall Street bankers and the captains of industry, whom they believed were engaged in a conspiracy to “enslave” the “little people,” just as the Witch of the East had enslaved the Munchkins. Populists viewed establishment politicians, including presidents, as helpless pawns or willing accomplices. Had not President Cleveland

bowed to eastern bankers by repealing the Silver Purchase Act in 1893, thus further restricting much-needed credit? Had not McKinley (prompted by the wealthy industrialist Mark Hanna) made the gold standard the centerpiece of his campaign against Bryan and free silver?

It is apt, then, that Dorothy acquires the Witch of the East's silver shoes at the behest of the good Witch of the North, who stands for the electorate of the upper Midwest, where Populism gained considerable support. (Later in the story, good witches are identified with the color white; silver is known as "the white metal.") Still, for all her goodness, the Witch of the North, like the voters of the upper Midwest, is no match for the malign forces of the East, her tender "kiss" on Dorothy's forehead (electoral support) notwithstanding. The death of the wicked Witch, however, is cause for rejoicing—the "little people" (owing to the destruction of eastern power) are now free. All along, the Munchkins were vaguely aware that their bondage was somehow linked to the silver shoes, but the shoes' precise power was never known. Similarly, although Wall Street and the eastern establishment understood silver's power, common farmers knew little of monetary matters, and bimetallism failed to resonate with eastern workers, who voted against Bryan in droves.

After Dorothy and her companions reach Emerald City, the Wizard sends them to kill the wicked Witch of the West. This Witch is also a cruel enslaver, and she appears to represent a composite of the malign forces of nature that plagued farmers in the Midwest and the power brokers of that region. The former menace is mirrored in the Witch's dominion, which recalls the parched plains of western Kansas, and by the ferocious wolves, ravenous crows, and venomous bees that she sends to destroy Dorothy and her friends. Each predator is summoned by blowing on a silver whistle, another example of a malicious use of the white metal. When the Witch's minions are themselves destroyed, she calls on the Winged Monkeys through the magic of a golden cap. The cap had already been used twice, once to enslave the Winkies and again to drive the Wizard out of the West, patent injustices committed through the power of gold. Yet in summoning the Monkeys, the Witch exhausts the cap's charm, and the flying simians (who had been forced to assist in her evil deeds) are liberated. The power of gold proves finite and illusory, and it requires the coexistence of silver (bimetallism) to sustain its power. No wonder the wicked Witch is so keen to possess Dorothy's silver shoes.

The malign manipulation of gold and silver by the wicked Witch represents the other half of the western menace: the self-interested juggling of metal currency by the western nabobs. McKinley of Ohio, for example, supported the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, voted for its repeal in 1893, and made the gold standard the cornerstone of his 1896 presidential bid. Mark Hanna, also of Ohio, served as McKinley's campaign manager and close advisor, and he was widely viewed as the Richelieu behind the throne. (Vilified by the Populists, Hanna had William Allen White's scathing attack on the Populists—"What's the Matter with Kansas?"—circulated throughout the country during the campaign.) Not surprisingly, the Wizard requires

the death of the wicked Witch of the West before he will grant Dorothy's "party" its wishes. The Witch's demise by water ends her evil reign, liberates her slaves, and restores the silver shoe she had stolen from Dorothy. In one fell swoop, the parched lands are watered, the farmers are freed, and silver is returned to its rightful owner, the people.

The fourth witch, Glinda of the South, is a good witch who, unlike her northern counterpart, understands the power of Dorothy's silver shoes. In 1896, Bryan's Democratic-Populist ticket carried the South, and some of the strongest silverites in Congress were from the South, whereas northern support for Bryan and free silver was more moderate. In *Oz*, the denizens of the South, the Quadlings, are described as an odd race who never travel to Emerald City and dislike strangers traveling across their land. Not since the 1860s had a southerner served as president, and immigrants and northerners were generally unwelcome in the South. Moreover, the road to the land of the Quadlings is perilous and rife with dangers. For those who were "different" (including resident blacks), the South could be a dangerous place indeed.

The Three Amigos

In the hope that the Wizard will help her return to Kansas, Dorothy embarks on the Yellow Brick Road to Emerald City. After traveling several miles, she encounters the Scarecrow, who does not "know anything" because he has "no brains at all." The brainless Scarecrow represents the midwestern farmers, whose years of hardship and subjection to ridicule had created a sense of inferiority and self-doubt. Populist leaders such as William Peffer and "Sockless" Jerry Simpson were often portrayed as deluded simpletons who failed to understand the true causes of their economic plight. The Populists' "stupidity" was also attested to by their apocalyptic rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and radical agenda, which included nationalization of the railroads, a graduated income tax, and the unlimited coinage of silver. Critics scoffed at their overblown rants, mocked their paranoid style, and dismissed their simplistic nostrums as the distempered ravings of "socialist hayseeds."

The picture of the Scarecrow is not so one-sided. His conduct on the journey through Oz is marked by common sense, resilience, and rectitude. He is not so dumb after all. As we learn near the end of the story, the Scarecrow-cum-farmer had brains all along—perhaps brains enough to grasp the true causes of his misery and the basics of monetary policy.

On the trek through the forest, where the road is in disrepair, the Scarecrow stumbles and falls on the "hard [yellow] bricks," a reference to the Populist claim that the gold standard had a damaging impact on farmers and the people at large. Still, the Scarecrow is "never hurt" by his falls, which suggests that the yellow metal was not the real culprit of the farmer's woes.

Proceeding down the road, the duo encounter the Tin Woodman. Once healthy and productive, the Woodman was cursed by the wicked Witch of the East, lost his

dexterity, and accidentally hacked off his limbs. Each lost appendage was replaced with tin until the Woodman was made entirely of metal. In essence, the Witch of the East (big business) reduced the Woodman to a machine, a dehumanized worker who no longer feels, who has no heart. As such, the Tin Man represents the nation's workers, in particular the industrial workers with whom the Populists hoped to make common cause. His rusted condition parallels the prostrated condition of labor during the depression of 1890s; like many workers of that period, the Tin Man is unemployed. Yet, with a few drops of oil, he is able to resume his customary labors—a remedy akin to the “pump-priming” measures that Populists advocated.

Having liberated the Tin Man, the trio proceeds through the forest, only to be accosted by a roaring lion. He is none other than William Jennings Bryan, the Nebraska representative in Congress and later the Democratic presidential candidate in 1896 and 1900. Bryan (which rhymes with “lion,” a near homonym of “lying”) was known for his “roaring” rhetoric and was occasionally portrayed in the press as a lion, as was the Populist Party itself. Bryan adopted the free-silver mantra and won the Populists' support in his first race against McKinley. Like the Lion of Oz, Bryan was the last to “join” the party. His defeat in the general election was largely owing to his failure to win the support of eastern workers, just as the Lion's claws “could make no impression” on the Tin Man.

Although Bryan's supporters considered him courageous, his critics thought him “cowardly” for opposing war with Spain in 1898 and the subsequent annexation of the Philippines. Yet, for anti-imperialists, who counted many Populists among their ranks, Bryan's unpopular stand was courageous indeed. Less courageous, however, were his final decision to vote for annexation (albeit as a tactical move) and his failure to fight vigorously for free silver in the election of 1900, both of which disappointed Populists.

Still, the Lion, without knowing that he possesses courage, really does. Near the end of the story, he slays a spiderlike monster that is terrorizing the animals of the forest. The predatory beast symbolizes the great trusts and corporations that were thought to dominate economic life at the turn of the century. Cast as the chief villains in the Populist drama, the trusts were often portrayed as “monsters” of one kind or another. “Sockless” Jerry Simpson called the railroads a “giant spider that controlled our commerce and transportation” (qtd. in Clanton 1991, 51), and the author of *Coin's Financial School*, the leading free-silver tract of the 1890s, represented the Rothschild money trust as an octopus. Baum himself used the monopoly-as-octopus metaphor in a number of later works, including a specific reference to the Standard Oil Company. Breaking up the trusts and nationalizing the railroads were key components of the Populist agenda, and Bryan favored trust busting if not outright nationalization. Accordingly, the Lion attacks and kills the great beast by knocking off its head. Freed from the eight-legged monster, the grateful forest dwellers vow fealty to the conquering Lion. Would not the Populists have done likewise if Bryan had defeated McKinley and, presumably, slain the trusts?

Of Mice and Monkeys

Another scrape with a menacing beast recapitulates the metaphor. When a “great yellow Wildcat” lights upon the Queen of the Field Mice, the Tin Man decapitates the feral feline with a single swing of his ax. For delivering the Queen from her “enemy,” the mice pledge obedience to the Tin Man. Their first act of service is to rescue the Lion from the “deadly poppy fields,” where the powerful scent of the flowers has felled the king of beasts.

The diminutive rodents represent the common people, and the “yellow” cat is yet another reference to the malign power of gold. By killing the Wildcat, the Tin Man symbolically slays a chief “enemy” of the people. The timely support of the mice parallels the importance of the common folk in Bryan’s bid for the presidency.

The Winged Monkeys, the unwilling minions of the Witch of the West, add a further dimension to the *Oz* allegory. These creatures represent the Plains Indians. As the Monkeys’ leader relates, “we were a free people, living happily in the great forest flying from tree to tree, eating nuts and fruit, and doing just as we pleased without calling anybody master.” The Monkey King admits to having engaged in a degree of “mischief,” but nothing to justify the harsh treatment the Monkeys received when “Oz came out of the clouds to rule over this land.” The Monkeys were initially sequestered, a reference to the government’s reservation policy. Later, they are forced to do the bidding of the Western Witch, who commands them with the golden cap. Yet the Monkeys are not inherently bad; they have become so only through an unnatural and evil force. This scenario parallels the view of reformers who blamed the Indians’ condition on the whites’ inhumane practices. Under Dorothy’s benevolent influence, the Monkeys are kind and helpful—that is to say, “assimilated.”

Chinatown and the Yellow Winkies

On the journey to find Glinda, the good Witch of the South, Dorothy and company pass through Dainty China Country, which they enter by climbing over a high white wall. China and its Great Wall are the obvious references. But what does China have to do with Gilded Age politics? First, China was in the process of being divided by the great powers (including the United States) into “spheres of influence” for the purpose of commercial exploitation. In 1899 and 1900, Secretary of State John Hay issued the famous “Open Door” notes in an effort to prevent rival nations from gaining “unfair” economic advantages in China. Second, the Celestial Kingdom was the only major nation still on the silver standard. It is apt, then, that Dainty China Country’s wall and floor are white, the color of silver bullion. Third, the Lion’s careless destruction of the china church echoes the territorial “breakup” of China by foreign intruders and the active proselytizing by Christian missionaries. Finally, the china Princess, who rejects

Dorothy's invitation to visit Kansas, resembles the dowager empress, who strongly opposed the foreign presence in China. The last two parallels recall the anti-imperialism that Bryan and others championed.

Another anti-imperialist theme appears in the form of the Winkies, called "yellow" because they reside in the Land of the West. The Winkies, who are forced to work for the Witch of the West, represent the "yellow man" of Asia, especially the Chinese immigrants and the native Filipinos. For decades, the Chinese had immigrated to the Far West to labor in various capacities. Given their "exotic" appearance, clannish habits, and willingness to work for low wages, they were often the targets of abuse, discrimination, and even murder. Under pressure from the authorities in California, Congress passed the Exclusion Act (1882), which banned Chinese immigration for twenty years.

The Winkies also resemble the Filipinos, who, after their country's annexation by the United States, found themselves (once more) subjected to a Western power. Demands for independence were denied on the grounds that the Filipino people were "unfit" for self-government. The assumption that the United States knew what was best for the natives was satirized in Baum's original script of the stage version of *Oz*, where the Scarecrow remarks, "It isn't the people who live in a country who know the most about it. . . . Look at the Filipinos. Everybody knows more about their country than they do" (qtd. in Dighe 2002, 93).

Oz, Emerald City, and the Wacky Wizard

The Land of Oz, with its varied landscape and diverse inhabitants, is a microcosm of America, and Emerald City, its center and seat of government, represents Washington, D.C. In an effort to be made whole, Dorothy and her band travel to the capital to see the Wizard, who presumably has the power to grant them their wishes. The journey to Emerald City corresponds to the Populist effort to acquire power in Washington, and the travelers recall the "industrial armies" who marched on the capital during the depression of 1893–97. The most famous of these, "Coxey's Army," was led by a successful businessman who urged the government to fund public-works programs (most notably a "good roads bill") to alleviate unemployment. Coxey, who hoped to meet with President Cleveland, was arrested for trespassing, and his proposals were ignored. Dorothy and company also face hazards on the road to Emerald City and are turned away by the Wizard, who shows little sympathy for their plight.

The Wizard, who "can take on any form he wishes," represents the protean politicians of the era, especially the presidents of the Gilded Age. Given the even division of Democrats and Republicans, and the razor-thin majorities of most presidential elections, candidates rarely took clear stands on the issues. As a result, voters often had difficulty in determining what the candidates stood for. The Wizard fits this description,

for “who the real Oz is,” Dorothy is informed, “no living person can tell.” Indeed, when the foursome enter the throne room, the Wizard appears to each in a different form. Like many politicians, he is unwillingly to help them without a quid pro quo: “I never grant favors without some return.”

Politicians are also infamous for failing to keep promises, and the great Oz is no different. When Dorothy’s party returns after killing the Witch of the West, the Wizard keeps them waiting, then puts them off. By accident, the all-powerful Wizard is exposed and his true identity revealed. Far from a mighty magician, “Oz, the Terrible” is merely a “humbug,” a wizened old man whose “power” is achieved through elaborate acts of deception. The Wizard is simply a manipulative politician who appears to the people in one form, but works behind the scenes to achieve his true ends. Such figures are terrified at being exposed; the Wizard cautions Dorothy to lower her voice lest he be discovered and “ruined.”

As it turns out, the Wizard hails from Omaha, where he became a talented ventriloquist and later a circus balloonist. Bryan was from Nebraska, was famous for his “hot-air” oratory, and in the minds of his critics was something like a circus ringmaster. Nebraska was also a bastion of Populism, and Omaha the site of the 1892 Populist National Convention, where the party adopted the “Omaha platform,” the movement’s leading manifesto. Following the party’s convention of the previous year, *Judge*, a popular magazine, parodied the Populists on its cover, which depicted a hot-air balloon made of patches that bear the names of the groups and parties that had rallied to the Populist standard: Knights of Labor, Prohibition Party, Socialists, Farmers Alliance, and so forth. In the balloon’s basket are caricatures of Populist leaders, preaching the “Platform of Lunacy.”

Identification of the Wizard with Bryan would seem to raise an obvious problem. Is he represented by the Lion *and* the Wizard? Bryan was never president, but he was a masterful politician and an aspirant to the White House. In conjunction with references to Omaha, ventriloquism, and the balloon, the link between Bryan and the Wizard is a reasonable inference. Just as some of Baum’s metaphors serve as a composite, the Lion and the Wizard represent different aspects of Bryan.

The Colors of Money

The Land of Oz is colorful, to say the least, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is replete with references to gold, silver, and green. A number of these references have been noted already, but the story makes several others. The references to gold and silver echo the prominence of monetary politics in the 1890s, especially the bimetallic crusade led by Bryan and the Populists. Moreover, gold and silver are often portrayed as working in combination. The Witch of the West conjures her minions with a silver whistle and a golden cap, and the Tin Man receives a new ax made of gold and silver, as well as a new oil can that contains both metals. Of course, there is Dorothy on her sojourn through Oz, “her silver shoes tinkling merrily on the hard, yellow, roadbed.”

The word *oz* itself is the abbreviation for an ounce of gold or silver. There are additional references to gold and silver, but the ones given here amply illustrate Baum's use of the monetary metaphor.

Green, often in combination with gold, is also a recurrent image. Then as now, green was the color of paper money. The Greenback Party, a precursor of the Populists, advocated the expansion of the money supply via the increased circulation of "greenbacks." Jacob Coxe was a greenbacker, as was James B. Weaver, the Populist presidential nominee in 1892. Most of the green imagery in *Oz* is general in nature and does not appear to indicate specific parallels. Toto wears a green collar that fades to white (silver), and later he receives a gold collar, as does the Lion. In Emerald City, everyone is required to wear green glasses with golden bands, so that nearly everything appears in a resplendent green. The Lion's liquid "courage" is poured from a green bottle into a gold-green dish, and the Wizard's balloon is patched with green silk of various shades. As the spectacles create an illusion, the liquid courage is only a placebo, and the balloon is a mere patchwork, so the demand for paper money is exposed as a panacea for the farmers' woes.

At the end of the story, the Scarecrow supplants the Wizard as the ruler of Emerald City, the Tin Woodman is made master of the West, and the Lion is placed over the animals of the forest. Dorothy transports herself back to Kansas by clicking her silver shoes together three times. All this is achieved with the help of Glinda, the good Witch of the South. The message? Populism is triumphant, the goal of gaining political power is achieved. Or is it? Neither the Scarecrow nor the Tin Man nor the Lion truly lacked what each believed he was missing; the great Wizard's powers proved illusory; and Dorothy had the power to transform her condition all along. These features of the story point to a more ambivalent result. Indeed, Populism's outright failure is suggested when Dorothy's silver shoes fall off in the desert and are "lost forever." After Bryan's defeat in 1896, the free-silver movement went into rapid decline. McKinley's reelection and the statutory adoption of the gold standard in 1900 spelled political oblivion for the Populists.

Conclusion

Critics of the allegorical reading of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* have made much of the discovery that L. Frank Baum was not a Democrat or a Bryan supporter. In itself, however, this discovery proves nothing. At most, it suggests that *Oz* is not a *pro*-Populist parable, something quite different from the claim that there is "no evidence that Baum's story is in any way a Populist allegory," as Hearn (1992) argued. The originator of the allegorical interpretation characterized *Oz* as a "critique" of Populism, not a defense. The assertion that there is "no evidence" of an allegorical subtext is simply myopic in the extreme. As the foregoing reconstruction shows, the evidence from the text is overwhelming, and, in light of Baum's political background, trickster personality, and subsequent work, it is all but conclusive: *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is a deliberate work of political symbolism.

Again, this conclusion does not require that each correspondence I have cited was intended allegorically or represents Baum's precise intention. Nor does it imply that each symbolic reference has a specific correlate; often the metaphors and analogies are merely suggestive. Conversely, the presence of "inconsistencies" and the absence of an obvious moral in no way diminish the reality of the symbolism.

The Wonderful Wizard of Oz is clearly neither a *pro*-Populist parable nor an *anti*-Populist parable. Strictly speaking, it is not a parable at all if *parable* is defined as a story with a didactic purpose. Baum aimed not to teach but to entertain, not to lecture but to amuse. Therefore, the *Oz* tale is best viewed as a symbolic and satirical *representation* of the Populist movement and the politics of the age, *as well as* a children's story. Quite simply, *Oz* operates on two levels, one literal and puerile, the other symbolic and political. Its capacity to fascinate on both levels testifies to its remarkable author's wit and ingenuity.

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