

Yellow Brick Philosophy

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The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

by L. Frank Baum

Harper Collins, 272 pp., \$9.95

ALTHOUGH DETAILS HAVE NOT yet been released, *The Los Angeles Times* reported last year that preliminary plans are in the works for an upcoming movie of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. By midsummer this year, the Harry Potter film series will have run its course, and what better way to fill the gap than by taking up Baum's set of Oz books (this is the first), with its cast of zany characters including a princess who undergoes a sex change and a legion of splendidly garbed humanoids whose limbs end in wheels instead of hands and feet? I disagree with Salman Rushdie's elevation of the iconic and justly well-loved 1939 film, the Judy Garland one, over the original Baum text. This text—literary, philosophical, and brilliant—merits priority.

Notwithstanding the whirlwind of adaptations, adulterations, dramatizations, spin-offs, ad-ons, pop-ups, memorabilia, and kitsch that have spiraled throughout the century since its original publication by George M. Hill in 1900 (with illustrations by W.W. Denslow), the original masterpiece survives and defies its would-be re-fashioners. Do we know why? Reading it again and trying to recall how turning its pages felt to me years ago as a child growing up in New York, I realized one would need a cloak of invisibility so as to slink past that angel with the flaming sword.

The book drops you, rubbing your eyes, into a mysterious ether—onto shifting sands (recall the “Deadly Desert”)—into oneiric realms, where you lose yourself and wander, enchanted: “The cyclone had set the house down, very gently... in the midst of a country of marvelous beauty....” “The road to the City of Emeralds is paved with yellow brick...” “I am Oz, the Great and Terrible. Who are you, and why do you seek me?” Charmed sentences follow one another like dance steps along the winding road itself. Yet few readers have focused on the book’s prodigious mental adventures.

But first: Dorothy, whose shoes, in the pages of Baum’s story, are silver, not ruby-red, appears before us not as a puppet but as a believable child. Denslow’s line drawings make her out to be no more than six. Who can fail to admire her for slapping the roaring lion’s nose while telling him to be ashamed of himself for trying to bite Toto? And for chastising the Wicked Witch who trips her and steals one of her silver shoes? And for steadfastly denouncing the less-than-candid Wizard and calling his bluff? Kind, gentle, honest, and loyal to her friends, Dorothy is endowed with Aristotelian virtue, with genuine heroism. Some interpreters pretend she grows up along the way so that, by the end, she comes to accept her dull Kansas home with aplomb. But Baum keeps her a little girl from start to finish. Aunt Em asks her on the last page where she has come from. One adverb reveals all: “‘From the Land of Oz,’ said Dorothy gravely.”

Beyond this—beyond magic, fantasy, and psychological verisimilitude—Baum brings to his pages a plenitude of intellectual puzzles. Subtly and with great charm, he explores in children’s terms the realms of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. He actually helps children learn to think. The philosopher Gareth Matthews, in *Philosophy*

and the Young Child, points especially to the Tin Woodman. This character may trouble children, who cringe inwardly at the thought of limbs being chopped off and cannot help wondering whether they could still be themselves if their parts were replaced. In a similar way, Matthews observed, Plutarch recounted the ancient paradox of the ship of Theseus, which, on display at Athens, had its planks supplanted when, one after another, they rotted away, until the entire ship was replaced, whereupon, the question arose as to whether what was now on display could still be deemed the ship of Theseus. Even a young child can thus grasp the power of Baum's metaphor. A welter of complex emotions arises when we cannot hold fast to a stable and continuous identity.

Dorothy and her readers learn similarly from encounters with the Lion. After she slaps his nose and he withdraws weeping (and, in Denslow's illustration, wiping his tears away with his tail), she asks him what makes him a coward: this is a child's quintessentially philosophical question. The Lion answers that it is a mystery: he was born that way. But when the Tin Woodman intervenes to suppose that, since the Lion's heart beats so fast when he is afraid, maybe he is suffering from a heart disease, the Lion responds meditatively: "Perhaps ... if I had no heart I should not be a coward." It is easy to miss the gravity of this line.

Later in the same scene, Dorothy makes an observation to the Lion that all the other beasts in the forest must be more cowardly than he, since they allow him to scare them so easily. To which, the Lion replies: "They really are ... but that doesn't make me any braver." Thus Baum asks us to consider whether virtue may be a matter of absolute rather than relative standards: a sophisticated idea for a children's book. His Lion wants to feel his bravery on his own terms.

Toward the story's end, the Wizard's actions raise serious questions in the domain of ethics. Dorothy, now bitterly disappointed and justifiably angry at the apparently fierce, chameleon-like Wizard for his failure to keep his promises to her and her friends (even though they have fulfilled his demand and have destroyed the Wicked Witch of the West) tells him he is "a very bad man." He answers her by saying that in fact he is really a very good man but a very bad wizard. This answer, as the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle might have pointed out, is a category mistake. Whereas, Dorothy is speaking of goodness in a moral sense, the Wizard is referring to badness or incompetence in a purely technical sense.

Later in the story, after the hot air balloon has burst its strings and ascended, leaving Dorothy stranded in Oz with Toto, and the Wizard has vanished beyond the clouds, Dorothy, despite her disillusionment and remorse, absolves the Wizard and forgives him. She says that, after all, he *was* a good man, even though he was truly a bad Wizard. She does this with the thoughtful justification that "he had done his best." Thus, Dorothy—wise child—helps sort out the category confusion by intuitively grasping that, whereas, in ethics, *intention* is central to our judgment of what is good and what is not and must be taken into account, in the realm of action we weigh results, quite apart from intention. Wanting to do well does not carry the same weight as wanting to do good.

Another philosophical theme: Dorothy's three friends, as we realize almost from the start of their journey, possess unawares the boons they seek from Oz. By employing this conceit—the "brainless" Scarecrow, for example, turns out to be the one who conceives the ingenious idea of chopping down a tree to make a bridge across the gulf they must cross in order to escape the ferocious Kalidahs—Baum asks us to ponder the value of self-knowledge and self-awareness. He makes us reflect on the relevance of these capacities in education and in other spheres of life and, indeed, in any pilgrimage that can be conceived as an adventure along a yellow brick road. He treats here, in his way, the theme made famous by Eliot's luminous lines from *The Four Quartets*, penned over forty years later: "We

shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.”

Dorothy’s direct interactions with the Wicked Witch also prove highly instructive. Seeing the mark made by the protective kiss on her forehead, the Witch backs off, for, as Baum writes, the Power of Good is greater than the Power of Evil. But, undaunted in her malevolence, the Witch persists with her scheming and cleverly concludes that, since Dorothy does not know how to use her power, or even understand that she has power, she can still be enslaved. Once again Baum opens our eyes to the tremendous value of self-knowledge. The narrative circles back again and again to the ancient Greek adage, thought to have been inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: “Know thyself.” And reflecting on that, we perceive its intimate connection with the problem of identity and with, therefore, the ship of Theseus.

The question of merit, and the meaning of merit, also echoes throughout Oz. After the friends reach the Emerald City at last, the Wizard asks Dorothy why he should help her, and she answers touchingly: “Because you are strong and I am weak; because you are a Great Wizard and I am only a helpless little girl.” These words ring with the logic of youth—a small child, by virtue of her being, deserves nurturance, protection, and gratification. Babies are unconditionally loved. We ask nothing of them. Yet as they grow older, rules ensue, and merit rears its head. “In this country,” the Wizard replies to Dorothy, “everyone must pay for everything he gets.” Similarly, to the Scarecrow, he repeats, “I never grant favors without some return.” These interviews occur, moreover, at the precise midpoint of the book. They highlight a significant milestone in the learning process.

It may be too much to hope that a new movie of Oz directed by Sam Raimi will try to convey any of this intellectual richness. Yet beyond spreading color, invention, and enchantment, L. Frank Baum’s masterpiece remains a literary work that inspires children to think; its well-worn printed pages and its quaint pictures open onto serious and expansive vistas of mental excursion.

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