

From Page to Screen: Dysfunction, Subtext and Platonic Idealism in Mary Poppins

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As Donald Levin points out in his excellent article "The Americanization of Mary: Contesting Cultural Narratives in Disney's *Mary Poppins*," critical considerations of the films produced by Walt Disney and his studios tend to be "rather harsh": Henry Giroux in *Breaking in to the Movies* and Lori J. Kenschaft in "Just a Spoonful of Sugar? Anxieties of Gender and Class in 'Mary Poppins,'" are representative of a school of thought that decries the "Disneyfication" of America in which patriarchal social and familial order, based on rigid hierarchies and racial and gender inequalities, is enforced via coded language and representations (115). Following Levin's example, this chapter too comes neither to bury Disney nor praise him, but to suggest another way of understanding his work. Much critical attention has been given to the historic and cinematic moment of this Disney blockbuster, but, to date, little has been paid to Disney's engagement with the film as a reader—how his responses to literature and his audience insights, which he described as "simple and corny" to Stan Hellenk, led to his selection and adaptation of Pamela Travers's story.

To begin, Disney pursued the film rights to *Mary Poppins* for over fifteen years. In 1944, his initial inquiries about them were rebuffed. In 1945, he sent his brother, Roy, to see Pamela Travers in New York, but Roy was unable to convince Travers to sign a contract. Then, in 1959, while in London, Disney decided to discuss the matter with Travers in person. At that meeting, his charisma and determination secured only the options, not the rights that he had been pursuing. Nonetheless, when one considers its box office returns,

Mary Poppins (1964) has proven itself to have been worth that chase and the preproduction difficulties created by Disney's lack of rights to the property. *Mary Poppins* (1964) overshadowed the profits made by *Snow White* (1937) to gross more than \$44 million worldwide by 1965. To date, *Mary Poppins* (1964) has earned \$102,300,000 in the United States.

In 1963, it is doubtful that Disney's team thought *Mary Poppins* (1964) a good idea at all. As Richard and Robert Sherman point out in *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious: The Making of Mary Poppins*, it took two and a half years to prepare the movie's screenplay. Only then did they and their colleagues, Don DaGradi and Bill Walsh, learn that Pamela Travers, a notoriously difficult author to please, would be approving their work before the project could be launched into production. "After we had written the whole thing, Bob and I were totally unaware of the fact that Walt only had an option on the property," Richard Sherman said. "[We were] totally unaware of the fact that Mrs. Pamela Travers ultimately would say whether we could do this or not." Convincing Travers to approve their work proved to be a Herculean task. Richard Sherman remembers that, after two months of frustrating meetings, Travers remained reluctant to permit Disney to continue with the project. "I think she had thirty days to consider," he said. "On the thirtieth day, she relented but she had to be the consultant." *Mary Poppins* (1964) moved onto the soundstage only after Disney had agreed to two conditions: that there was not to be a romantic affair between Bert and Mary and that the film be set in Edwardian London.

Many of the controversies that erupted during preproduction concerning the screenplay resulted from Disney's acquisition of the option to a property lacking a unified plot. For Disney, this was not unusual, for he did not buy stories for their plots as much as he bought them for their ideas. Throughout his career, the master storyteller regularly adapted and/or fashioned plots for properties that he acquired for filming. As Disney told Hooper Fowler in 1964, "We buy them [good story ideas], some of them we invent, or they're based on classics that we kind of bring up to date, but they're awful hard to find, the good ones" (105). Richard Sherman recalls that, at the beginning of *Mary Poppins*' pre-production, Disney asked that he and his brother read the book. The Shermans were "impressed with the characters ... but there was no story line. It was a series of adventures. *Mary Poppins* flies in for no apparent reason and flies away again at the end." "We handed him six chapters, and we had underlined them in crayon," Richard Sherman continues. "He [Disney] chuckled and reached into his desk and pulled out his book...." Robert Sherman adds, "the same chapters were underlined in his book" (*Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*).

Disney has always credited his young daughter Diane for introducing him to the narrative potential of Travers' bestseller, but it is impossible to think that Disney spent twenty years pursuing a property which he himself had not read carefully. Reading *Mary Poppins* with the critical eye of an editor, Disney chose to adapt to film Chapter I. East Wind; Chapter II. The Day Out; Chapter III. Laughing Gas; Chapter VI. Bad Tuesday; Chapter VII. The Bird Woman; and Chapter XII. West Wind. When the Sherman brothers presented Disney with the same choices, Disney knew that he had found people whose narrative insights were similar to his own. He immediately hired them to work on *Mary Poppins* (1964).

Typically, Disney's treatment of a film during preproduction was hands-on. As he told Lee Edson, "I'm always close to projects when we're chewing over the basic idea. Once the pattern is set ... I let the staff take over and I go on to other things" (74). Setting the pattern for *Mary Poppins* (1964) was very hands-on indeed. As Valerie Lawson points out in *Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P.L. Travers*, Disney was "besotted" with his project: "he slept at the studio, filled rooms with drawings of how *Mary Poppins* would look, stayed in the office after the animators had left, emptied their trash cans and next morning waved discarded roughs in their faces, urging them to 'go back to this'" (259). Disney liked to think of himself as "a bee that flits from flower to flower, taking a little pollen here, a little pollen there," building "up the honey in the honeycomb" (Davidson 127); however, according to *Newsweek*, the Disney Studio was no garden of roses: it was "strictly a one-man show.... Walt can be kind and a dictator at the same time; in the final analysis, all ways are his ways" (85). In *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious: The Making of *Mary Poppins**, visual artist Bill Ellenshaw and artist/sculptor (animatronics) Blaine Gibson both remember Disney looking over their work at night when they were not present. Roy E. Disney explains his uncle's behavior: "That's the nature of the business we're in. Of course you know someone has to be the producer, and if that relationship's working right, the producer's vision is the over-riding vision. And it feeds off all the other people and their ideas and their contributions, but it always has to subject itself to the one end product and that's one man's vision" (*It All Started with a Mouse*).

To Disney, the Story Department was the "heart" of his studio, and it was imperative that the details of the Story be "all worked out" (Thomas, *Walt Disney*, 133). Thus, as Richard Sherman points out, the Disney writing team's pressing priority in pre-production was to establish a logical sequence of cause and effect in their screenplay: "we wanted the story to have a need for *Mary Poppins* to come and this need was [due to] the fact that the parents were so busy doing their own thing they weren't paying enough attention to

their children," he says. "That would be the key." Working with DaGradi and Walsh, Sherman and his brother "were very confident" by the time Mrs. Travers arrived in California that she would be "bowled over" by their work.

• Much to their dismay, Travers wasn't. She had very different ideas about what would constitute the success of her story. As Robert Sherman remembers, "She didn't like anything we wrote" (*Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*). During her pre-production meetings with the Disney team, Travers, concerned with preserving the atmosphere of her narrative, concentrated on correcting what she considered to be egregious errors. Overlooking the importance of cause and effect for film narrative, she pointed out that "the book should be read very carefully for atmosphere." According to Travers, details of the setting like the nanny's tape measure had to be presented in the film exactly as they were in the narrative. For instance, she says, "Now. I want this tape measure to be used as I put it here because it was a tape measure that my mother had when she was a little girl, and I think it would be very nice" (*Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*).

Travers' insistence on maintaining her characters as types also conflicted with film narrative's dependence on backstory and character development to establish its audience's belief in the story proper. For Travers, whose *Mary Poppins* never provides explanations for her behavior, plausibility of characterization and plot were simply not issues. The readability (and success) of *Mary Poppins* rested on a systematic breakdown of the reader's expectations, not the development and growth of its characters. Thus, the world of *Mary Poppins* is not governed by natural law and cause and effect relationships: in it, animals can (and do) talk, adults give tea parties while floating in midair, and children enter and enjoy the landscape of a sidewalk painting. In *Mary Poppins*, London is a place in which no one (with the possible exception of *Mary Poppins*) knows what will happen next. Created by this uncertainty, Travers' narrative tension is further developed by *Mary Poppins*' unwillingness to acknowledge the anomalies that Jane, Michael, John and Barbara experience when she is present. In "Laughing Gas," for example, she refuses to answer Michael's question on the Bus about Uncle Wiggs "going up in the air": offended that Michael describes her Uncle "[r]olling and bobbing on the ceiling," she scolds the children. "How dare you!" she snaps. "I'll have you know that my uncle is a sober, honest, hard-working man, and you'll be kind enough to speak of him respectfully" (45-7). Michael, who knows that *Mary Poppins* can speak with animals, also does not receive an answer from her when he wonders how she knew that Mrs. Lark's Andrew was not a "ninkypoop" (62). Like Michael, the reader must be content never to know. As Jane points out to her brother, *Mary Poppins* will "never, never tell us"

(62). The causal chains of Travers' fictional world simply are not revealed, because Mary Poppins never tells "anybody anything" (15).

With this in mind, it is not surprising that character motivation also became a matter of dispute between Travers and the Disney team. As art director Ken O'Connor points out in *It All Started with a Mouse: The Disney Story*, Disney's animators understood that "Walt was basically a realist; he wanted three dimensions in the characters." Aptly, in preproduction, Sherman and his colleagues also envisioned Travers-type characters being three-dimensional, changing and developing in response to the action taking place throughout the film's narrative. Travers, however, saw no reason for her type characters to change their natures. When one considers her resistance to plot development, her scandalized reactions to the screenwriters' treatment of her characters are very understandable. "Change the father?" she snorts much like Poppins herself before correcting their concept of Mr. Banks during a tape recorded preproduction meeting. "It's not a change. He's always been sweet, but worried with the cares of life" (*Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious*).

Narrative film not only demands its Story's conflicts, whether they are emotional, spiritual, intellectual, or psychological, be plausible, but also that they be expressed in material terms. As Julie Andrews points out, Disney's Mary Poppins (Julie Andrews) is an attractive character, because she "fixes things"; visual metaphors, her efforts make "families better" (Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious). Cleaning up the Nursery therefore restores order and authority to the top floor of Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane, resolving Jane (Karen Dotrice) and Michael's problems and inspiring the other adults in the household to restore order to their lives as well. The kite which Mr. Banks (David Tomlinson) repairs for Jane and Michael (Matthew Garber) therefore not only signals the return of his parental authority but also the repair of the family itself. Like the kite, the Banks are no longer dysfunctional. Mr. Banks, carrying the kite, expresses their rehabilitation by joining hands with his children during the movie's final song and dance. Mrs. Banks (Glynis Johns) supports her husband by providing a "proper tail" for "a proper kite."

Personal space, a semiotic often used in film and literature to express emotional and social well-being, is an important narrative element in *Mary Poppins* (1964). The physical distance which the members of the Banks family maintain from one another is a reliable indicator of the degree of the family's dysfunction. Until Mr. Banks' priorities change from being those of a banker to being those of a husband and father, affectionate gestures and acts of emotional closeness (hugging and kissing) do not take place or are discouraged in his presence. When Mr. Banks is no longer employed by the Bank, another semiotic is immediately brought into play. Emerging from the basement with

the kite that he has mended, Mr. Banks becomes the emotional center of the family. First embraced and then kissed by his wife, he is physically reintegrated into his family while they dance. As the Bankses step out their front door, Mrs. Banks joins her left hand with Jane's right hand. Jane holds her father's right hand. On the steps, Michael completes the visual metaphor, holding his father's left hand and carrying the mended kite in his left hand. Skipping down the street, the family breaks its chain briefly as they pass a lamp post, Mr. Banks and Jane letting go of one another and immediately reforming their attachment once they are past the obstacle.

Already in the Park, other families are arriving to fly their kites. Bert (Dick Van Dyke), now a kite salesman, informs his customers that flying kites too will transform them. The experience of flying a kite will make these people "lighter than air" and raise them above the mundane concerns of everyday life, "over houses and trees." As the final song of the movie suggests, with their fists holding tight to the string of their kite, the Banks do experience their "highest height". Their differences resolved, every member of the family unit is making another's happiness his or her priority.

The strength of their emotional bonding is expressed by their physical closeness. Michael flies the kite for the family. Mr. Banks joins the activity, standing immediately behind him and placing his hands on Michael's shoulders. When the camera pulls back, the Banks family is revealed, their proximity recreating the human chain forged on the way to the Park: Jane and Michael are placed in front of their parents, but Mrs. Banks is linked to Jane and Mr. Banks, her left hand rests on her daughter's right shoulder and her right shoulder is nestled into Mr. Banks' left pectoral while his right hand supports her right elbow. Mr. Banks' left hand rests on Michael's right shoulder, while Michael flies the kite, completing the family tableau in which the individuals physically (and emotionally) support one another. The Banks are so closely connected their movements create a single unit: the movements of the adults' arms and heads in this scene mirror those of the children. When the children move their arms upwards, so do the adults. When the adults turn their heads, Jane and Michael do so as well.

Paralleling the movements and activities of other individuals found in the Park, the Banks family is also reintegrated into polite society. Throughout this scene, other families are also flying kites. A corporate "family" is also engaged in the same activity next to them. The Junior Mr. Dawes (Arthur Malet) and his colleagues, mirroring one another in bowler, tie, vest, and carnation, are incongruously flying their own kites in unison nearby. Upon discovering Mr. Banks, the Junior Mr. Dawes immediately invites him to rejoin them, since his father's death "left an opening for a new partner."

-placing the company's red carnation in his employee's lapel and patting n on his chest in a familiar fashion, the Junior Mr. Dawes dissolves the social distance between the two men, welcoming Mr. Banks back into the happy family of investors" at the Fidelity Fiduciary Bank.

Re-admitted to the world of commerce, Banks regains his financial stability and social respectability. More important, his previously irreconcilable public and private lives created by the social and personal roles of banker, husband, and father are for the first time in this movie successfully integrated. Here it is emphasized that Banks' return to the Bank does not signal a return to his previous way of living. After thanking the Junior Mr. Dawes, he rejoins Mrs. Banks, who very uncharacteristically kisses him in public. The Banks family then reassembles itself again into a unified group: even more uncharacteristically, Mr. Banks puts his arm around his wife; she reciprocates his affections by moving into his embrace; the parents then lean forward and lovingly embrace their children. Witnessing the tableau created by the family, Mary Poppins' parrot acerbically comments that the children "think more of their father" than they do of their Nanny. Finally, the Banks family is, Mary Poppins asserts, "as it should be."

Tellingly, Pamela Travers' *Mary Poppins* concludes without the physical closeness and the happy ending of Disney's movie. After tidying the Nursery, Travers' Mary Poppins simply tells the children to behave themselves and leaves the room without saying good bye. The children (and the family) are abandoned, and the narrative ends in crisis. The Nanny's note hints that she may return, but the weeping children are left, as Mrs. Brill observes, "in a lurch" (206). Here, the narrative itself identifies character and plot motivation as arising problems—driving home the often raised point that the cause and effect relationships which govern life are not always discernable to those affected because of the inherent limitations of the individual's point of view.

Understanding events in *Mary Poppins* and identifying the dysfunction that work in the Banks family depend entirely upon one's intimate knowledge of the action of its story. In "West Wind," for example, the children and the reader are reminded at the beginning of the chapter that Mary Poppins is leaving because she promised. Unaware of this promise, Mrs. Banks concludes quite rationally that Nanny's departure is irrational. "It's outrageous," she declares, "One minute here and gone the next. Not even an apology. Simply saying 'I'm going!' and off she went. Anything more preposterous, more thoughtless, more discourteous—" (205). Given the evidence, it is not surprising that Mrs. Banks believes herself to have been treated very badly, having been left "high and dry" without a word of notice" (205). Also inconvenienced, Mrs. Brill concludes that "[a] heart of stone, that's what that girl

had and no mistake.... How we stood her so long, I don't know—with her airs and graces and all" (206–07). Significantly, neither woman's point of view has been broadened by the Nanny's absence: their social and personal relationships with the children remain the same. Mrs. Banks kisses her children "absentmindedly" and leaves them "with an anxious little line on her forehead" (206). After Mrs. Brill feeds the children their supper and puts them to bed, it is Jane who takes on the function of mothering, tucking Michael "in just as Mary Poppins used to do" (209).

Because of the unsatisfying ending in the Nursery at the Banks' home in Travers' story, it seems incongruous at first that Walt Disney, famous for his family-centered approach to filmmaking, would have chosen to pursue *Mary Poppins* as a project at all. Disney, however, recognized in the Banks' dysfunction the key to successful film narrative. He had "learned a lot about storytelling" from another master storyteller, Charlie Chaplin: "Charlie taught me that in the best comedy you've got to feel sorry for your main character," he says to Frank Rasky. "Before you laugh with him, you've got to shed a tear for him" (117). Designed to arouse the readers' (and thus the viewers') sympathies for the Banks family, *Mary Poppins* offered Disney a golden opportunity. Disney capitalized on Chaplin's narrative insight in preproduction, creating a screenplay in which not one but many characters with whom audience members could first sympathize and then identify. Emotionally neglected, the Banks children touch everyone's hearts. Having lost control of his family and his job, Mr. Banks invites sympathy from his male viewers experiencing the effects of feminism that was gaining momentum in the 1960s. Torn between her responsibilities at home and her desire for political and social equality, Mrs. Banks was immediately identifiable to women in Disney's audience. As Disney alumnus Walt Kelly noted to *Newsweek* in 1962, Disney had "great sensitivity to people in mass. He [knew], instinctively, how to reach Mr. and Mrs. America" (87).

In 1937, Disney's knowledge of his audience also paid off handsomely. Terri Martin Wright points out in "Romancing the Tale: Walt Disney's Adaptation of the Grimms' 'Snow White'" that Disney had banked his hopes on the appeal of the popular folktale when he decided to adapt *Snow White* to film. His acquisition of the fairy tale's film rights was motivated by his need for "a recognizable story with known characters, since his film would lack the name recognition associated with famous actors," Disney already knew the powerful effect that fairy tale could have on screen. As Bob Thomas points out in *Disney's Art of Animation: From Mickey Mouse to Beauty and the Beast*, the producer had enjoyed a screening of the silent film version of *Snow White* (starring Marguerite Clark) so much as a boy that he wanted to see it again and again (65).

Given the popularity of the fairy tale and lasting impression that Clark's performance had made on him, it is not surprising that Disney pursued the rights to *Mary Poppins* with such fervor. The ~~resemblances that Travers' narrative bore to *Snow White* promised the master storyteller, filmmaker, and animator another treasure trove of raw material which he could refine and make into a blockbuster.~~ Published in 1934, *Mary Poppins* was so popular that ~~Travers had written four sequels by 1962 to satisfy the reading public's demand for her Nanny's adventures: *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), *Mary Poppins Opens The Door* (1943), *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952), and *Mary Poppins from A to Z* (1962).~~ A well-recognized story with known characters, *Mary Poppins*, like *Snow White*, certainly did not need the name recognition of movie stars to draw its audiences to the box office. Its readers constituted a ready-made, enthusiastic, and growing fan base upon which Disney could depend.

Of course, ~~the fantasy elements of Travers' narrative also appealed to Disney who preferred to work with the traditional genres of folktale and fairytale which adapted easily to the medium of animation.~~ Aptly, his film adaptation of *Mary Poppins* offers viewers ~~a modern version of the fairy tale formula in which the children are allied with a witch.~~ As Disney himself points out, there is "no magic" to the formula that he used in his movie making: "It's ~~the old fairy-tale formula with the happy ending,~~" he tells Bill Davidson. "People like to root for Cinderella and the Prince" (132). *Mary Poppins* could not have been a better vehicle for Disney's narrative vision: even its realistic setting satisfied the animators' requirement that fantasy elements in Disney movies be based on the real.

In *Mary Poppins*, ~~the relationship between the real and the fantastic is carefully delineated.~~ In "East Wind," Travers' narrator painstakingly describes the ordinary, dilapidated everyday nature of Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane before establishing the rather fantastic nature of the City where Mr. Banks works, "cutting out pennies and shillings and half-crowns and three penny-bits" (4). Ordinary Days Out for the Nanny are also established first as humdrum affairs before they become magical adventures because "everybody's got a Fairyland of their own" (4). Likewise, in *Mary Poppins* (1964), Disney carefully establishes the day-to-day nature of the Banks' concerns in the drawing room and at the breakfast table before the audience accompanies the children on their outings with their Nanny to the carousel and race course in Bert's chalk drawings.

A prime example of Disney's narrative insight into the relationship between the "real" and the "fantastic" in fairy tale is found in his preproduction team's decision to move the setting of London in Travers' narrative from

the London of the Great Depression to a soundstage resembling an idealized version of the City during the Edwardian period. In ~~doing so, Disney drew on his public's nostalgia for Britain's pre-war past.~~ Irretrievably lost to the vicissitudes of history, Edwardian London ~~lent itself naturally to the conventions of the fairy tale, being at once recognizably "real" and a place existing as a familiar golden memory in a universally recognized "once upon a time" to his audience.~~ Jim Fetherolf's impressionistic matte paintings of the City, with which *Mary Poppins* (1964) opens, confirm the validity and power of Disney's "formula"—enshrined in the viewer's cultural memory, their aesthetic re-evaluation of the "real" London replaces the grim, and often sordid, materialistic reality of English life in Britain's largest and often unhealthiest community with the idyll of a sleeping City, dreaming of itself being the pinnacle of an orderly, peaceful, and civilized way of life. Via the camera's cosmic point of view, Disney's audience is prepared for the successful introduction of magic and the film's fantastic elements well in advance of *Mary Poppins'* arrival at Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane.

Further establishing the importance of point of view to the viewer's successful navigation between the "real" and the fantastic, Disney skillfully introduces the ~~mundane nature of London~~ life. Bert first appears as a busker, entertaining the occupants of Cherry-Tree Lane, before he and *Mary Poppins* take the children (and the audience) into the imaginative world of his chalk paintings. Admiral Boom's mania for punctuality and order, acquired during his term in the Royal Navy, is carefully introduced before the fantastic (and disruptive) effects of his retirement are illustrated at eight o'clock every morning in the Banks household. *Mary Poppins* is interviewed for the position of the Nanny by Mr. Banks before viewers learn that spoons full of sugar, differently colored and deliciously engineered to suit the individual taste of each patient, *do* help the medicine go down; that empty carpetbags *can* produce improbably large objects like coat racks, potted plants and standing lamps; and that "cheeky" images in mirrors *can* and *do* sing their own tunes.

In effect, ~~two Londons co-exist in *Mary Poppins* (1964): the actuality of the adult world of business and commerce and the magical reality of the London discovered by the children via *Mary Poppins* exist side by side,~~ generating dramatic irony in much the same way that dramatic irony is generated in *Snow White* (1937). In *Snow White* (1937), the concerns of the Queen (Lucille La Verne) in her castle and those of *Snow White* (Adriana Caselotti) at the dwarves' cottage are largely unrelated: *Snow White*, on the one hand, is interested in establishing principles of hearth and home in the forest, while the Queen, on the other, is preoccupied with eradicating the girl whom she considers to be her rival. Likewise, in *Mary Poppins* (1964), Mr. Banks is busy at

the Bank "totting up numbers in a balanced book," while Mary Poppins is simultaneously powdering her nose and sitting on a bank of clouds high above the City and Uncle Albert (Ed Wynn) is laughing uproariously, floating with Bert and the children in midair around his drawing room. Both films disparate settings are united in the end, and Disney's ironies, created by the bifurcation of space, are dissolved. At the conclusion of *Snow White*, the princess is returned to the castle and takes her rightful place in the "real" world. At the end of *Mary Poppins*, the "lost" father leaves the City and, restored to Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane, rediscovers family life and the magic of London.

To date, little attention has been directed to the matter of romance, an important element of the Disney narrative, in *Mary Poppins* (1964). As Martin Wright comments, romance, hand-in-hand with comedy, and combined with political commentary set a pattern for future Disney films. In *Mary Poppins* (1964), this pattern containing romance is apparent despite Travers' stipulation during preproduction and condition that Bert and Mary were not to be romantically involved. Expressed in the movie's song and dance, Bert has a crush on Mary Poppins throughout the movie. When she is near, his heart sings and his feet dance. There also is evidence that she returns his affections: at times, the couple's rendition of their "jolly holiday" brings to mind the song and dance routines of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Top Hat*.

Like the popular full-length films produced in Hollywood during the 1930s, *Mary Poppins* (1964) offers audiences romance with an attractive hero and heroine. Behaving like a "gentleman," Bert takes Mary to tea. Infatuated, he compares her with a bevy of other attractive and talented young ladies, asserting that "[i]t's true that Mavis and Sybil have ways that are winning. And Prudence and Gwendolyn set your heart spinnin', Phoebe's delightful, Maude is disarming, Janice, Felicia Lydia, Charming!" After listing the attractive attributes of other potential romantic interests, he concludes that Mary outshines them all: "cream of the crop, give her the top is Mary Poppins, and there we stop." Any doubt that Bert is smitten is dispelled when he (and his equally infatuated chorus of penguins) break into a comic mating dance, declaring, "When Mary holds your hand you feel so grand your heart starts beating like a big brass band." Emphasizing the depth of his emotion, Bert's profession of devotion—"no wonder that it's Mary that we love"—is made, not once, but three times. Even the animators' scanty mis-en-scene directs its viewer towards the "teasing" nature of the couple's date: as Bert and Mary enter and exit, the restaurant's sign reveals that they have been taking tea at TeaS. Further arousing the viewer's curiosity about the nature of their relationship, Mary and Bert end the scene embracing one another in a lover's

waltz—another staple of successful Hollywood romance. At the end of the movie, it is not surprising, then, that Bert's eyes, carefully and fully highlighted, are starry as he watches Mary carried away by the West Wind and that he calls after her, "Don't stay away too long."

Menace (from an evil villain), comedy and heart, and a happy ending complete the Hollywood's popular full-length film formula (Martin Wright 65). Disney carefully employs these elements in *Mary Poppins* (1964). Menace heightens and sustains the movie's narrative tension. Whenever Mary Poppins is absent, the children are threatened. At the beginning of the movie, they appear to be lost. When they accompany their father to the City, Jane and Michael must first flee from the rapacious, tuppence-snatching board members of the Bank and then escape the clutches of the old crone who attempts to kidnap them. Their adventures serve to develop Bert's status as a romantic hero throughout the movie, for the children are always safe when they are with him. Aptly, when they encounter Bert in the dark alleys of London's waterfront, he rescues them—not only restoring order to the scene, but also conveying a broader perspective of the Story itself. Unaware of Mr. Banks' shoddy mishandling of the matter of Michael's tuppence, Bert reminds Jane and Michael their father is "a fine gentleman" who, as a father, sacrifices his own personal happiness to support them. Because Mr. Banks is the family's provider, he has to "grind, grind, grind at that grindstone," Bert says, making the children aware that they have been acting inappropriately.

Here it should be noted that the dramatic network of overlapping ironies produced by the differing points of view of the adult and child and audience member also deftly produce the movie's comic moments. Unlike the members of the audience, Admiral Boom (Reginald Owen) does not recognize the dancers on the rooftops as chimney sweeps. "Hottentots!!" he shouts and disperses them and the good luck they bring with them with a spectacular display of fireworks. Like Admiral Boom, Mr. Banks is also unaware of how important the chimney sweeps are to the psychic health of Londoners. Ironically, he chases them out of his house when he needs their lucky handshakes the most. After the dancers leave, Banks finds himself walking back to his workplace to be fired. His dismissal from the Bank is also highly ironic, because it becomes the catalyst for his reunion with his family. Being fired is the best thing that could have happened to him.

Disney uses another staple of narrative film, parallel action, to reinforce and further develop the competing points of view upon which the movie's comic ironies turn. Bert, Uncle Albert and the Senior Mr. Dawes (Dick Van Dyke), for example, all find laughter uplifting experiences—in the most literal sense possible. All three are elevated by the same joke. The Senior Dawes,

however, does not share Uncle Albert's unhappy return to earth. He dies laughing, and, ironically, as his son points out to Banks, his father's death was nothing to be sorry about. He'd never seen "Father so happy."

Another skilled Disney touch is revealed in his preproduction team's careful editing of Travers' material to produce the film narrative's characters. In filmmaking, it is a general rule of thumb that less is more. A prime illustration of this principle, Bert, a conflation of working-class characters, is far more complex than the Match-man of Travers' narrative who has only "two professions" (17): those of selling matches and drawing pavement pictures. A successful jack-of-all-trades, Disney's Bert is a one-man band, a sidewalk scriber, a chimney sweep, a hot chestnut salesman in rainy weather, and a cite salesman on sunny, windy days. Integrating all these aspects of his life, he acts as a model problem-solver for Jane and Michael. As a surrogate father, he succeeds where Mr. Banks does not. Bert takes the children on outings with Mary, and teaches them the value of hard work, generosity, good manners, and compassion for others. Unlike Mr. Banks, Bert is invariably good natured, not being alienated from his work or the people whom he loves. As Donald Levin notes, Bert is "the human heart of the film" (119). Representative of the working class, Bert is portrayed as being wiser, kinder, and more capable, clearly better able to manage his affairs than his social betters.

Here it should be noted that the material that Disney chose not to use from *Mary Poppins* is, in some ways, as important as what he chose to include in his movie. The Banks twins, John and Barbara, do not appear in *Mary Poppins* (1964). Elements of their story, however, do materialize via the movie's subtext, introducing and reinforcing the Edwardian notion of the innocence of children. The talking Starling found in "John and Barbara's story," for example, appears as an animatronic robin that lives outside the nursery window and hops trustingly on Mary's finger when she first visits the Nursery. Disney's introduction of Mrs. Lark's Andrew as the bearer of bad news, Mary's and Bert's conversations with the talking cartoon animals in Bert's pavement picture, and even the chatty parrot-headed handle of Mary's umbrella remind viewers of John and Barbara's newly born experience of the world, which enables them to remain cognizant of the prelapsarian moment when animals and men understood and spoke to one another. Practically perfect in nearly every way, Mary Poppins, like John and Barbara, also retains her ability to talk with animals. Jane and Michael, however, are only able to listen to and understand the talking cartoon animals during the movie's fantasy sequences. Sadly, the world which they generally inhabit is the one created by the Fall.

Well aware of this, Disney did not regard his films as primarily the pre-

serve of children. "If there is a secret to what I do ... I guess it's that I never make the pictures too childish, and so they do not become strictly children's films," he says "I always try to get in a little satire about human foibles, like when I kidded academic pomposity in *The Absent-Minded Professor*" (Davidson 132). In *Mary Poppins* (1964), Disney's delightfully satiric treatments of the movie's talking animals create an oblique critique of Britain's class system. In film narrative, subtext is also often an important outlet for directors' and writers' social and political critiques. Dismounted after falling into a puddle, a British aristocrat indignantly and impotently sputters in an upper class accent, "Did you ev-ah???" His social outrage and Etonian accent at the hunt being disrupted by working class gate-crashers is echoed by his horse sitting beside him in the same puddle: "Nev-ah!!" Social and psychological hieroglyphs, he and his mount could have been lifted from the pages of *Aesop's Fables*. Bert's sympathies during the fox hunting sequence lie with the Irish fox, identified by his heavy Irish accent introduced in the phrase, "Faith and begorra!" Recognizably American, Bert's sympathies appear to be rooted in the experience of the American Revolution: after the fox refers to the English hounds pursuing him as "redcoats," he recognizes the fox as a kindred spirit besieged by the British, and exclaims, "Poor little feller. Let's help him." Playfully overturning established social order, Disney directs his audience's laughter at the rule-bound British aristocracy. Rescued by Bert, the fox, riding a horse, outwits his pursuers.

Here it should be noted that in *Mary Poppins* (1964), Disney's critique does not exempt the working class from its examination, although, as Donald Levin notes in "The Americanization of Mary: Contesting Cultural Narratives in Disney's *Mary Poppins*," there is "a sympathetic focus on situations of the underclass" in *Mary Poppins* (1964). For example, in the Winner's Circle at the race course, living in the "time of men" does not ensure that men are the "lords and masters" of their households. Ironically, the Cockney speaking wife who beats her husband about the head with her tambourine is not the "lovely thing" he proclaims her to be, but his decision-maker and law-giver. The commiseration which this scene offers middle and working class men, however, does not extend into the public domain, and a severe critique of the British class system is found in the charming infatuation of Bert and Mary's waiters with Mary. Gushing with pleasure at the opportunity of serving a lady, who is "their favorite person," the penguins, like the turtles, who earlier conveyed Mary and Bert across the lagoon at no expense, announce that their services are "complimentary." As the turtles literally demonstrate and the penguins suggest, the upper class in Britain gets a free ride from those socially placed below them.

Disney's cartoon animals and characters also illustrate their creator's response to broader thematic and philosophical matters found in Travers' *Mary Poppins*. Travers' platonic idealism, found in her theosophical suggestion that individuals may experience transcendence via their recognition of the connectedness of all things, is expressed in "Full Moon" by the Hamadryad, who ensures that Jane and Michael remember that "the same substance composes us—the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star—we are all one, all moving to the same end" (174–75). Like the Hamadryad and the other inhabitants of the Zoo in "Full Moon," Disney's animated animals also encourage the viewer to interrogate the nature of what we generally consider to be reality. Each animated animal in "Jolly Holiday," actualizes a cultural *and* a natural actuality. The fox, for example, is at once a representation of an Irishman *and* a fox found in nature; the horse, a representation of an English aristocrat *and* a horse; the penguin, a representation of a waiter *and* a working class man. These types represented by Disney's animated animals on the screen are in turn themselves representations of human beings who may be sitting in Disney's audience and who in turn are themselves representations of a Platonic ideal or form. In addition, Mary, Bert, Jane and Michael, characters portrayed by actors (another generation of representation) who interact with the animated husband and wife from the band in the Winner's Circle (yet another generation of representation) draw further attention to the notion of platonic idealism, for each type of representation directs viewers in the audience to recognize themselves also as representatives of an Ideal or Form.

Additionally, each talking animal reminds us that the prelapsarian Ideal, not attainable on Earth but knowable via its representation in Bert's pavement picture, may still be experienced ... if only for the duration of the movie. As Travers' Hamadryad would approvingly note, in Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964), animated or not, all the movie's characters are, as the products of Disney's insight, "all one," being at base narrative representations of Forms.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that the fundamental dynamic in Disney's *Mary Poppins* (1964) is Romantic, visually expressed in the movie's emphasis on upwards motion. Every character in *Mary Poppins* (1964) wishes to better him or herself by rising above his or her station in life: their ambitions to ascend may be attempts to overcome the restrictions of age, as in the case of Jane and Michael who rebel against Katie Nanna (Elsa Lanchester); the limitations of gender, as in the case of Mrs. Banks and her suffragettes who want the Vote; the privations of class, as in the case of the chimney-sweeps leaving the flues of London to dance on its rooftops; or the very bonds of nature, as in the case of Mary Poppins, who being "practically perfect in every

way," is able to escape even the laws of gravity and fly away, high above London. An expression of the Romantic spirit, even a lowly cartoon penguin can dare to transcend his condition and kiss a lady even though he is quickly rebuked for the social transgression.

It is not surprising, then, that Dick Van Dyke, in his introduction to *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious: The Making of Mary Poppins*, considers Walt Disney the "perfect producer" for what is "a nearly perfect film." Romanticized (by himself, his publicity department, and his biographers), Disney's career has become legendary, and Disney himself an icon, one who attained the American Dream: Disney's narrative of his life casts himself as being representative of the American Character, rising from humble beginnings to become one of the most influential men in America. His refusal to admit defeat and his willingness to try new things are typically American, and Disneyland, Disney World and Epcot embodiments of the American Dream. Significantly, in *Mary Poppins* (1964), Disney's conflation of the Romantic spirit and platonic idealism is one in which hope for a better future is not grounded in one's material transcendence promised by the Bank. The desire of the heroes and heroines to rise in this movie, as in all of Disney's family-oriented films, is motivated, not by the promise of an elevated social or economic station in life, but the desire for an emotional and spiritual happiness unattainable in this world.

In sum, it seems that everything in *Mary Poppins* (1964), from the gaggle of nannies waiting impatiently outside Number Seventeen Cherry-Tree Lane to the Senior Mr. Dawes to the smoke rising about London's rooftops, goes up. *Mary Poppins* (1964) not only interrogates narratives of class and gender, but in doing so also normalizes and validates the enduring attraction of perfection, revealing one of America's most cherished cultural secrets—the promise that one's desire to rise will be rewarded if it is motivated by love. Ultimately, love links the members of the Banks family to one another. And at the movie's happy ending, as Bert watches Mary Poppins fly away, Disney suggests that we are all connected to one other by love.

Finally, Disney's treatments of Travers' narrative are not what one would expect from someone "kind of simple and corny at heart" (Hallenk 80). In 1964, frustrated by the series of identical plaques in the trophy-jammed ante room of his office, which all read "For the Best Children's Pictures," the master storyteller spluttered to Bill Davidson, "They persist in giving me that blasted award every year. I don't make children's pictures. Why do they do it?" (132). When one considers Disney's sophisticated insights into narrative and the idealistic nature of his audience, this sort of critical acclaim for his work certainly seems to have been misplaced. From his pursuit of *Mary Poppins* as a

property to his inclusion of popular elements of Hollywood feature-length movies in the 1930s, Walt Disney, as a reader, clearly knew what constituted and created a blockbuster movie. Given its complexities, it is not surprising that *Mary Poppins* (1964) continues to be ranked by the American Film Institute among the Top-Ten Film Musicals of All Time.¹ Disney, meanwhile, still remains known, not as a brilliant reader and filmmaker, but as Uncle Walt—trapped in his own historic and cinematic moment, unable to escape from the cultural narrative of family-orientated perfection which he himself recognized, developed, and sustained.

Note

1. See Tim Dirks' AMC Filmsite's listing of the AFI's 25 Greatest Musical of All Time at <http://www.filmsite.org/afi25musicals.html>.

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