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"WHO IS AFRAID OF THE BIG BAD WOLF?" REFLECTIONS OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN A DISTORTED MIRROR

I

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the effects of political correctness (henceforth: PC) by examining the politically correct versions of two old-time favorite bedtime stories; "The Three Little Pigs" (henceforth: TTLP) and "Little Red Riding Hood" (henceforth: LRRH). While the subject of this essay may seem facetious at first glance, the new versions of these tales appearing in a volume titled: *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories: Modern Tales for Our Life and Times* provide valuable insight into the latest controversy concerning "the battle to define the meaning of America" (Bush 44). James Finn Garner's rewriting of thirteen well-known children's tales to fit the taste of the all too sensitive 90's resulted in a scathing parody of PC's excesses. The book, published in 1994, demonstrated the author's skills in manipulating seemingly innocuous texts to achieve biting satire.

The publication of Garner's work was one of the indicators that the PC controversy entered mainstream American consciousness by 1994 (Bush 42). The race, gender and class-oriented mindset of PC promoted several conflict patterns transferring the traditionally homogeneous WASP image of America into a social framework of victims and villains. In this

Manichean perspective the Euro-American was singled out as the dreaded oppressor of ethnic minorities, women and the environment. Contemporary reality was polarized as a constant power struggle between whites and non-whites, men and women and the oppressor and the oppressed.

Consequently Garner, with an obvious purpose of ridiculing the PC movement, refashioned these childhood favorites to reflect the above-mentioned hostility patterns. Seven of the thirteen tales have female protagonists. The heroine in "Little Red Riding Hood" in her confrontation with the wolf and the lumberjack represents the archetypal feminist gone amok. In "Rumpelstiltskin," Esmeralda, a victim of the partiarchal system, turns out to be the champion of women's reproductive freedom. The heroine of "Rapunzel" matures from a helpless child to a determined artist rejecting the restraints of the capitalist system. The title character of "Cinderella" leads a female revolt against the male-approved image of feminine beauty. In "Snow White" the protagonist forges an alliance with the evil queen to promote women's awareness. The princess in "The Frog Prince" dons the garb of an eco-warrior determined to save the planet from greedy real estate developers. All these six stories, as prescribed by predictive PC logic, depict women in a positive role. The only exception is the title character in "Goldilocks" who, as a greedy biologist, pays for her sins by being eaten by the bears.

Two tales contain only animal characters. "The Three Little Pigs" is altered to present a clash of Western and Non-Western cultures and "Chicken Little" highlights the anomalies of the American legal system. In "The Three Co-Dependent Goats Gruff" Garner offers a scathing criticism of PC's obsession with victimhood. "The Emperor's New Clothes" makes a farce of the very weapon PC afficionados rely on, euphemism. Finally "Jack and the Beanstalk" promotes the values of environmental awareness and "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is an acerbically prescient vision of the backlash against PC extremism.

Whereas all these tales are rewritten to parodize different aspects of PC, there are two particular stories which depict a clear confrontation between characters representing different value systems. Both in TTLP and

LRRH the main characters face the deadly threat of the wolf, who as a symbol of PC's evil incarnate, must pay for his sins with the loss of his life.

II

In the revised version of TTLP Garner left the skeleton of the original story untouched presenting the familiar confrontation between the "big bad wolf" and the three little animals. The three pigs built their homes from different materials; sticks, straws and bricks, respectively. The wolf blows down the first two houses and dies of a heart attack during his attempt to destroy the third. Garner's tale describes America as a multicultural state with the three pigs representing the three principal non-white ethnic and racial groups (Blacks, Hispanics and Asians) along with the wolf as the embodiment of "mainstream America." Post-Cold War U.S. is afflicted by the victimhood syndrome, as following the Puritan value system's emphasis on victimhood and redemption, minorities are assigned the role of the historical victim and white Euro-American males are viewed as the victimizers (Hughes 11).

The author's opening premise is an idyllic picture with three little pigs living in harmony with their surroundings, building their homes in an environmentally sensitive way. Since construction materials that are "indigenous to the area" are acquired without doing considerable harm to the land, it is assumed that the white European as the number one culprit for all ills besetting minorities is also responsible for the destruction of the environment.

This idyl reflects the Menandian definition of multi-culturalism, the coexistence of functionally autonomous subcultures under a dominant culture, as these symbols for the four dominant racial and ethnic groups of the U.S. live under one dominant culture, the forest. As a reference to the cultural separatism of ethnic groups under the label "ethnic pride," Garner in his description of the pigs' lives employs the terms "peace and self-determination." When the wolf "driven by expansionist ideas" wants to enter the pigs' houses, "mainstream culture" clashes with ethnic culture. When he

is rejected as a "cultural imperialist" the term "manifest destiny," a reference to the ideology of the Westward Movement, makes it clear that the author identifies the wolf with white Americans. Garner, through his sarcasm, betrays his condemnation of PC's rejection of the Euro-American worldview which, according to Florida A & M professors Yvonne R. Bell, Cathy L. Bouie and Joseph A. Baldwin, is based on such ideas as "survival of the fittest" and "control over nature" (Beard 23).

The wolf's assumption of the identity of the colonizer bent on building a banana plantation subsequent to blowing away the first home places the events in the framework of the core vs. periphery, indicating a constant power struggle between colonizers and nations fending off colonial status. As the pigs defiantly shout back at the wolf "go to hell you carnivorous imperialistic oppressor!" the author's reference to a favorite expression of PC zealots, "oppressor," becomes an important symbol.

In this "culture of complaint" the term indicates a hostile relationship between genders, races and ethnic groups (Hughes 9). Women are victims of male oppressors and all minorities claim protection from the number one oppressor, the white Euro-American male. Furthermore the term, "carnivorous," must not be overlooked either as a reference to the destruction of the environment.

It is illuminating to observe how the pigs repel the wolf's advances. At the straw house, upon hearing the plea: "Little pigs, little pigs let me in!" the pigs shout, "Your gunboat tactics hold no fear for pigs defending their home and culture!" The pigs are obviously vulnerable to the wolf's attacks and their cry of fear over the loss of their culture could create sympathy for them. Consequently, minority cultures fending off the alleged attack of mainstream American culture can similarly hope for an outpouring of public sympathy. Furthermore the wolf (mainstream American culture) regards the pigs (minorities) with condescension, treating them as children:

"They are so childlike in their ways. It will be a shame to see them go but progress cannot be stopped," the wolf muses. Minorities have often been described as childlike in American literature, suffice it to refer to minstrel shows and Topsy's portrayal by Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Virágos 168—169).

Having blown off the house of sticks, the wolves build a vacation complex with all the obligatory politically incorrect attractions. "Native curio shops" provide a devalued and commercialized version of minority culture, "dolphin shows" remove animals from their natural habitat, and force them to perform tricks against their will. At this point Garner pokes fun again at one of his favorite targets, environmental and animal rights activists, who view human-animal relations in a framework of victims and villains. This perspective is demonstrated by the recent drive to exchange the term "zoo keeper" for "wildlife friend," or the tendency to assign zoos such new picturesque names as "animalcatraz" and "zulag" (Beard 108).

When the wolf attempts to blow away the brick house his effort results in death, "a massive heart attack brought on from eating too many fatty foods"—a demise statistically very typical of white males. The manner of the wolf's death also serves as a parody of PC's rejection of meat eating, viewed as a practice that forces the perpetrator "to commit cruelty to nonhuman beings" (Beard 97). The next event is a revolution in which mainstream American culture is displaced in favor of a minority civilization. The end result is an utopia where the pigs live in a world of "free education, universal health care and affordable housing for everyone." This world, in addition to being an antithesis to the present U.S., where due to the constraints imposed by the development of liberal capitalism these goals are almost unattainable, is also a mockery of PC's afore-mentioned image of the Euro-American worldview.

Garner's version is an exercise in bias-free writing or writing to implant social virtue. The race, gender and class-centered mindset of PC is bent on the elimination of all bias from communication and these efforts can lead to judging literature upon intended social value over artistic merit. Consequently a type of criticism emerges declaring *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a better book for its purported arousal of indignation over slavery than Melville's *Moby Dick* viewed as a commemoration of a laundry list of cruelties to animals (Hughes 113).

The tale explores the limits of PC behavior. PC aims to eliminate any kind of bias from the public sphere. It assumes that all types of bias are harmful regardless of the element of inborn prejudice or the need to

discriminate among various stimuli. After all when one decides that one meal is better than the other, one discriminates and if there was no discrimination at all one could not recognize danger either.

The original purpose of bedtime stories was socialization, or teaching the values of a given society to children. Folk tales not only entertained but familiarized children with such values as bravery, honesty, chivalry and respect for one's elders. In order to achieve a comic effect, however, Garner argues that these stories reflected the prevailing value system of the patriarchal society with their sexist, discriminatory and culturally biased messages.

The pigs as a community in the end defeat the wolves and create an un-American social system without competition or individualism. Thus the ideal behavior espoused in the tale is the questioning of the foundations of American society. The story presents a confrontation between the individual and the community, and the individual is bound to fail. Since PC foists a race, class and gender framework on American civilization, individualism is suspect. The wolf is apparently guilty of a number of sins; he is carnivorous, thus presumably hostile to the environment, he is also condescending and represents America at its imperialist worst.

The story is not only a tale of multiculturalism, but a description of colonialism as well. There are several references to the core-periphery relationship. The wolf is the land hungry U.S. and the pigs are innocent Third World nations seeking to defend themselves. "Gunboat tactics" refers to the term "gunboat diplomacy" often used by the U.S. in reference to nations it deemed to be in its sphere of national interest. The establishment of banana plantations is a clear reference to expansionism and Central America (cf. the banana republics: Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua etc.) and the pigs' letter to the United Nations is an attempt to appeal to the world's conscience. Furthermore the war of independence is organized by "porcinistas," a take on Nicaraguan freedomfighters, the Sandinistas.

Garner's tale also reflects PC history where a new set of double standards is employed (Hughes 117). The pigs, or the natives are described as Rousseau's Noble Savages whose lives are rudely interrupted by land hungry whites. TTLP functions on two levels; it is an allegory as well as a

parody of multiculturalism in which the mainstream Euro-American ideal must surrender to the demands of an idyllic rainbow nation, and a biting satire on U.S. colonial aspirations.

Garner presents the caricaturized extremities of the PC perspective through a distorted mirror following the tradition of the humor of the American West, "which relied mainly on exaggeration and a blending of just and earnest which has the effect ... of singing comic songs to a sad tune" (Cunliffe 190). Indeed, the tale abounds in comic exaggerations: the wolf dies of a heart attack, the pigs organize a revolutionary war and fight with rocket launchers and machine guns. Also one cannot forget about the author's caveat stating that no actual wolves had been hurt during the writing process. Garner is an observant student of the Mark Twain school of deadpan humor following his master's emphasis on puns, wordplays, straightfaced exaggeration and hilarious incongruity of style (Cunliffe 206). The author's use of the term "porcinistas" fashioned after the term "Sandinistas" or the reference to the wolf's "gunboat tactics" while the whole story takes place on land increase the tale's comic effect. Garner also chose to recast a children's story as a tale of a revolution, thereby commingling a bedtime tale with the contents of a history book. Suffice it to refer to the use of such terms as "manifest destiny," "internal affairs" and "socialist democracy."

While the original version was clearly intended for children, the reworked story demands an adult audience. The story teaches the value of environmental consciousness as the pigs who lived in harmony with their surroundings defeated the carnivorous wolf. It also echoes the victory of the community over the individual and the defeat of the core by the periphery. TTLP is a true reflection of the PC world where hitherto highly esteemed assumptions such as the basic values of American democracy and the capitalistic system undergo a serious challenge as the excellence of the Euro-American ideal is threatened by the onslaught of mediocrity and infantilism (Hughes 193).

My second choice is the PC version of the all time favorite "Little Red Riding Hood." Like in the previous story, the author leaves the principal elements intact until the absurd ending, in which the lumberjack about to

intervene to save the young girl from being devoured by the wolf is slain by the grandmother.

This tale provides excellent examples of language revisionism, the purported elimination of all terms reflecting any type of bias or discrimination from the English lan-guage. The first line reads: "There was a young person named Little Red Riding Hood." In order to deflect the charge of sexism, as the term "girl" carries a somewhat demeaning connotation when applied to grown women, the author opted for the value-neutral form. His choice demonstrates the futility of PC's oversensitivity because the protagonist is really a minor who, being addressed as a "girl," would not suffer any discrimination. Garner, at the same time, ridicules the position of "non-sexist language authorities" who regard the term "girl" unacceptable for any female past puberty (Beard 91).

This girl is asked by her mother to take a basket of fresh fruit and mineral water to her grandmother. The contents of the basket in the original story were a piece of cake and a bottle of wine to be substituted here by the above-mentioned items for in the health-conscious 90's pastry and alcohol are deemed health hazards.

LRRH's basket also reflects Garner's frustration over the increasing politicization of the American identity, as according to Jerry Adler: "In America ... everyone's identity is politicized—not just in terms of race, ethnicity religion and language ... but also gender, sexual behavior, age, clothing, diet and personal habits" (Adler 30).

The author employs the term "womyn" for "women" in his effort to avoid the use of the gender-specific "man" suffix. Undoubtedly, thanks to the advances of PC, the "man" suffix is the most endangered element of the English language. According to Saussure one's knowledge of this world is dependent upon the language that serves to represent it (Norris 4). Thus a language full of sexist, racist and ethnocentrist terms would contribute to the entrenchment of a sexist, racist and ethnocentrist society.

In like fashion George Orwell argued that language was a mirror of existing social conditions, and the elimination of undesirable words led to the improvement of those conditions. Following this line of reasoning, the elimination of the remnants of sexism from language would lead to a bias-

free social order. Robert Hughes, however, elaborately illustrated the linguistic futility of the anti-"man" campaign as the suffix in Old English was gender-neutral.

LRRH's selection for the task of bringing food to her grandmother is not governed by a sexist division of labor pattern but by a need to create a feeling of community. The original premise of the grandmother's health problems is discarded in order to combat prejudice against the elderly. The young girl's fear of the woods, a crucial element in the original story, is ommitted as an example of Freudian (Western) thinking. Similarly to the other tale the protagonist is confronted by a wolf, who brings the white, sexist male to mind. The description of the wolf's "slavish adherence to linear, Western style thought" is an expression of PC's rejection of Western culture.

The author uses a euphemism to describe blindness (optically challenged) in order to avoid appearing ableist or prejudiced against handicapped (less able) people. The reference to Grandma's big nose is softened in an effort to fend off the charges of lookism, the discrimination based on physical appearance.

While in the original story the lumberjack (woodchopper person) was the savior of Grandma and LRRH, here he is cruelly rebuked when about to interfere in the conflict between the wolf and the young girl. After being called a "sexist and a specieist," he is killed by Grandma who jumps out of the wolf's mouth, leaving little doubt that even the helpful intentions of white males are interpreted as manifestations of sexist behavior. The closing section with the establishment of an alternative household with the surviving characters is a manifestation of the challenge against the traditional male-dominated family pattern in which, according to *The Official Sexually Correct Dictionary and Dating Guide*, one faces the constant threat of rape and murder (Beard 53).

As in any morality tale, the characters serve as symbols. While in the previous story the wolf and the three pigs represented certain elements of American culture and components of a geopolitical equation, the PC version of LRRH describes a confrontation between the sexes. There is an ironic

twist in the story as the purported villain, the wolf, ends up on the positive side and the original hero, the lumberjack meets an ignominious end.

Both the Grimm version and Garner's "improved" portrayal of LRRH symbolize the position of American women. The first version represents the romantic paternalistic image of women confined to the home and in need of male protection. The Twentieth Amendment awarding women the right to vote, women's participation in the two world wars and the feminist movement's gains in the 1960's led to the demise of the traditional woman's image. The "cult of domesticity"—spawned in the colonial era—gave way to the cult of femininity as more and more women became assertive upon their rights as full participants in American society (Chafe 259). By challenging stereotypical division of labor arrangements, rejecting the notion of the "proper place of women" and gaining the right to decide upon matters involving her own body, such as abortion, the American woman began to threaten the foundations of a patriarchal society.

The new LRRH is a feminist who brazenly rejects the wolf's sexist remarks and the lumberjack's help. While Garner celebrates the awakening woman, ironically the cause of her mental, spiritual and political regeneration, feminism, contributed to the reappearance of the Little Red Riding Hood Syndrome. As radical feminists, like Andrea Dworkin argue that women are increasingly exposed to male aggression, the victimization of women becomes a sensitive issue. Antioch University's Sexual Offence Policy with guidelines projecting women as potential victims of aggression and the mass of sexual harrassment complaints flooding the courts inspired Sarah Crichton to declare: "We are not creating a society of Angry Young Women. These are Scared Little Girls." Thus Garner's LRRH as an Angry Young Woman is misplaced in a society where Scared Little Girls are in a majority (Crichton 42—44).

While in the first story the wolf represented mainstream American culture and the nation at its colonialist worst, in LRRH his character is more complex. The wolf makes sexist remarks and, as the text indicates, his "status is outside of society." On one hand he is a sexist male, but on the other he is "unhampered by rigid traditionalist notions of what was masculine or feminine."

He is the embodiment of what Richard Wasserstrom calls the "assimilationist ideal." According to this concept "people are not socialized so as to see or understand themselves or others as essentially or significantly who they were or what their lives would be like because they were either male or female" (788). The assimilationist society is the antidote to a sex-role-differentiated social organization where traditionally power is concentrated in the hands of males.

The characterization of the wolf echoes Joyce Trebilcot's notion of androgynism as well. Based on the distinction between sex and gender—the former a biological, the latter a psychosocial factor—Trebilcot recognizes the existence of poly and mono-androgynism. The mono-androgynist model is founded upon the notion of pure femininity and masculinity establishing a gender-based division of labor in the process. The poly-androgynist framework is technically a combination of male and female psychosocial characteristics (Trebilcot 794—803). The wolf follows the latter model as he on one hand devours the grandmother, committing aggression, thus displaying an allegedly male feature in the process. On the other hand he finds a sense of community with Grandma and LRRH and echoes the "feelgood I am O.K., You are O.K." philosophy of the early 1980's. Affirming PC's obsession with victimhood and the complaint mode, he also appears in a positive light as a victim of specieism, the notion of humans' alleged superiority over the other elements of the natural world.

While the Grandmother's character symbolizes the elderly in society, the story attempts to fight this group's stereotypical image and replaces the ailing senior citizen with an active mature person slaying the woodchopper. Consequently following PC's twisted logic, the true villain is the lumberjack. Not because he committed evil acts, but by his position and group affiliation as a victimizer of females and the environment.

Since the PC version of LRRH is a morality tale as well, certain conclusions about the story's message must be drawn. The tale teaches one basic lesson, the immorality and depravity of discrimination as only those characters survive unscathed which are not guilty of prejudicial acts or statements. It reinforces the nationwide obsession with victimhood and promotes such role models as the liberated feminist woman and the

physically and intellectually active mature female. The tale is also heavily influenced by cultural relativism, the notion of assigning equal value to all cultures, especially prevalent in LRRH's responses to the wolf's advances calling his sexist and offensive remarks elements of an "entirely valid worldview."

Garner's rewriting however is also the work of a master parodist incorporating the elements of satire. He virtually creates a written version of the straightman in order to increase the comic effect (Holman 484). However, in this straightman the mainstream American reader can recognize himself as his traditional assumptions of the sexist division of labor and his ageist concept of the elderly are struck down. The author, borrowing freely from Henry Beard and Christopher Cerf's *The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook*, also pokes fun at the over-sensitivity of the PC mindset. Garner employs exaggerations in order to enhance his satire as the end of the tale reminds the reader of Baron the Munchausen's tales.

The other familiar technique of satire, incongruity, is also present as certain elements of the tale are given a PC explanation. Consequently the wolf's devouring of the grandmother is explained by ideology, and the lumberjack has to die to redeem himself for being a "tree butcher" ((Beard 95).

III

While these two tales are obviously caricatured and exaggerated versions of the original, they present a reliable picture of the US. in the post-Cold War era. The PC bedtime stories' emphasis on the victim as a new role model affirms the common wisdom that societies upon reaching a sophisticated level of economic, social and cultural development in lieu of real enemies invent new ones.

It can be said that Garner provided a deconstructed version of the two folk tales. Following this philosophy's questioning of "previously unquestioned postulates of order," the author undermines the traditional

nature-culture, man-woman framework (Holman 125). In TTLP the cultural and ideological awareness of the pigs (culture) defeat the hunger and aggression (nature) of the wolf. In LRRH two females with the help of an animal eliminated Public Enemy No.1, the (white) male.

The characters of the two tales also lend themselves to the Four Senses of Interpretation (Holman 213), a quadri-partite method of analysis distinguishing between literal, allegorical, moral (tropological) and spiritual (anagogical) levels of meaning.

Consequently in TTLP the wolf is literally a carnivorous animal, allegorically the white male or the U. S. with colonizing aspirations, tropologically an example of ethnocentrism and colonialism, and anagogically is evil incarnate. His counterparts are literally domestic animals, allegorically minority cultures or nations victimized by cultural and geopolitical imperialism, morally the ideology of defending one's home and culture, and anagogically the incarnation of the good fighting a just war.

While LRRH is literally a young girl, allegorically she stands for the women of America. Tropologically she is the embodiment of feminism and presents the liberation of women on the anagogical level. The wolf literally is a predator, allegorically a victimizer and a victim, morally the embodiment of sexism and a victim of specieism, and spiritually he represents the evil consequences of victimization. The Grandmother literally is a matriarch, who allegorically stands for the fate of the elderly, morally teaches the well-known lesson of the evil of discrimination, and spiritually the victory of the victim over the victimizer. Finally the lumberjack is a (white) male forest worker, a sexist or specieist person, the chief victimizer, and the embodiment of prejudice and discrimination, respectively.

According to James Davison Hunter the current uproar over PC is an example of a cultural conflict, known as "political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding" (Bush 44). These two tales clearly illustrate the moral understanding of the PC worldview leaving no doubt that in this clash of alleged victim and victimizer the latter cannot hope for a fate better than a self-induced death or the ax of an indignant minority.

But, at the same time, one cannot forget that in the battle against extremism Garner's acerbic tongue-in-cheek humor is a reliable ally.

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