Pay No Attention to That Man: Government Crimes in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

Since the mid-1900’s, literary critics have held L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (WWO) to be a book with strong political overtones. From Henry Littlefield’s shallow interpretation of the fairy tale as an allegory about Populism, to John Funchion’s discovery of its potential as a cosmopolitan critique, nearly every political philosophy has been represented. Of particular interest to the critics are the supernatural elements of the fairy tale: Dorothy’s magical slippers; the self-aware and self-conscious Scarecrow, Tin Woodman, and Cowardly Lion; even the supernaturally well-ordered social landscape of Oz. Each of these otherworldly artifacts has been discussed and disagreed on in terms of its political symbolism: what movements, subcultures, or cultural leaders each might represent, as a natural extension of Baum’s highly political personality (Littlefield, Ritter, Funchion). But no critic has dared to address more than scantily the one element of the story that finds itself lacking in both magic and wonder: the Wizard himself. Given that he is one of only three clearly-defined political entities in Oz until the denouement, any failure to include him in a discussion of the book’s political implications should create a sense of disharmony in the literary conversation: somehow, the most political character has not been politicized. Gretchen Ritter indirectly describes the Wizard’s place in the novel by describing his kingdom, the Emerald City, as “a place of illusions where deception and aloof behavior provide the basis for authority” (182). The deception and aloof behavior referred to here is, of course, the Wizard’s. But this seems to be an apt description of other governments
in the Land of Oz as well: the Wicked Witch of the West and the great spider of the South rule in the same manner, and are equally overlooked in terms of political critique. The Wizard is not only the geographic center of Oz, but also a template for the other governments in it. Hugh Rockoff adds, “The promises of the Wizard of Oz (like those of [a politician in Baum’s time]) are partly hot air” (755). Partly is a euphemism here. Those promises are completely hot air, and this begins to reflect Baum’s suspicion toward the “wizards” of his own government. Careful observation reveals that a comprehensive understanding of Oz’s political landscape can only be reached if we embrace the Wizard and other rulers as an integral part of it.

An effective exploration of Baum’s attitude toward government must include both his fiction and non-fiction writings. In terms of fiction, the behaviors of WWO’s eponymous Wizard and his governmental counterparts, the Wicked Witch of the West and the great spider of the South, reveal a palpable hostility—which is probably directed, Littlefield and Function would agree, toward America’s 19th-century political administrations. These administrations had demonstrated a strong mix of incompetency and corruption by deceiving and endangering the country’s inhabitants. Several of the behaviors of Oz’s governments are allegorical to the flaws and even moral crimes of governments that had set the stage for Baum’s upbringing, which should lead us to investigate his non-fictional writings. An especially notable matter (and one that Baum was very vocal about) was the government’s treatment of Native Americans in the 1800s, which is reflected in nuanced ways in WWO.

Enumerating the crimes of the Wizard of Oz provides compelling insight into Baum’s conceptions about how those in positions of authority are prone to treat others. The Wizard’s first act occurs before the events of the book, when he joins forces with the Wicked Witch of the North (who has long since disappeared by the time Dorothy arrives) to seize the government of
Oz from King Pastoria and then kidnap his daughter, the heiress to the throne (*The Marvelous Land* 171). He deceives the people of Oz into believing that he is a powerful wizard, using a combination of puppetry, ventriloquism, and intimidation. Even the Good Witch of the South believes him to be all-powerful, and thus sends Dorothy to him to request her passage home.

When she arrives, rather than admit his inability to grant her wish, the Wizard lies to her, claiming that he can (*The Wonderful Wizard* 108). Then, to add injury to insult, he sends her on a mission which he can only reasonably expect to end in her death. This mission involves killing the Wicked Witch of the West, who is known for enslaving the westernmost people of Oz. The Wizard dismisses the requests of each of Dorothy’s friends by assigning them the same impossible task, continuing to imply that he is capable of granting their wishes. His reasoning for all of this is perversely capitalistic: “In this country everyone must pay for everything he gets” (108). Despite his position as a deified despot, supposed to have unimaginable powers, he unloads a deadly task on a young girl and three handicapped misfits as “payment” for gifts that he supposedly could give them without any trouble. When they return after the unexpected defeat of the Witch, he attempts to hide from his obligation by ignoring them, and only when threatened with Winged Monkey warfare does he give them an audience. Finally, revealed by Toto to be nothing more than a pitiful old man, he minimizes his crimes without a hint of remorse and immediately makes plans to escape before his fraud can be publicized.

Unfortunately, he is successful, and departs Oz without facing justice. Dorothy proves to have superhuman powers of forgiveness, even for a child, and thinks nothing of the man who has been both aggressive and hateful toward her.

The crimes of the Wicked Witch of the West and the great spider of the South are much more apparent than the Wizard’s, but no greater in gravity. The reader may be tempted to assume
that the Wizard’s reign is the least cruel of the three, but there is no evidence to prove it. The comparability of their empires is most strongly apparent in the means by which they control their subjects. Of his arrival in Oz, the Wizard explains, “I found myself in the midst of a strange people, who. . .thought I was a great Wizard. Of course I let them think so, because they were afraid of me. . .I ordered them to build this City, and my Palace. . .” (153). Clearly his power is absolute, and he feels no shame about using it to force his subjects to labor, even just “to amuse [him]self” and aid in his self-aggrandizement. And when this doesn’t satisfy him, he then “put[s] green spectacles on all the people,” demonstrating that he owns their minds—their perspective, experience and judgment—as well as their bodies. The Wicked Witch of the West holds the same control over her subjects, supported by the same sort of fear: “. . .the yellow Winkies. . .were the slaves of the Wicked Witch and too afraid of her not to do as she told them” (126). The only unique behaviors we can condemn her for are when she briefly beats the Winkies, when she strikes Toto with her umbrella, and when she trips Dorothy (121, 126, 127). Aside from these trite acts of violence, the Wicked Witch is the Wizard’s equal; both are symbols of bad government. The great spider of the South appears more briefly than the other two, but completes them in a compelling way. Though it owns its subjects’ minds using fear and intimidation, as the others do, it is not motivated so much by greed or power; rather, the spider eats its subjects in order to sustain its own life. Though the spider, the Wizard and the Wicked Witch all prove willing to resort to murder, the spider is unique as a natural creature that uses power only as a means of self-preservation. Here, Baum may be suggesting that the lack of benevolence in political leaders is a fact of nature. We should also remember that the Cowardly Lion, who we generally see as a protagonist in the tale, uses the great spider as a way to gain despotic power. Borrowing a capitalistic principle from the Wizard, he asks the terrorized forest
creatures, “If I put an end to your enemy, will you bow down to me and obey me as King of the Forest?” (197) Evidently, he feels no concern for his future subjects, except in terms of the power they are willing to grant him. Here, the novel hints that even the good and mild-mannered are susceptible to corruption by the prospect of power.

When Baum created these rulers, he framed a specific sort of government as inspired by his own experience. We can characterize this government by studying the rulers’ actions. To fit the bill, such a government would need to meet these specifications: first, it would need to be an aloof government with no power (or no desire) to benefit and protect its constituency; second, it would make its living by destructive means, resorting to intimidation to protect its position; and third, it would commit acts of open hostility toward its weakest and scarcest citizens. The Wizard adds details that the others are not suitable to: he claims to uphold a capitalistic system, but this system ultimately fails; and he escapes proper acknowledgment and punishment for his crimes (it’s worth noting that the Wicked Witch is killed by accident, not as punishment, and the great spider is killed by the Cowardly Lion in a bid for political power, so in terms of due process both of them go unpunished as well). The governments described by critics such as Littlefield and Ritter fit this mold well, which gives new perspective to their arguments.

Littlefield begins his essay, *The Wizard of Oz: Parable on Populism*, by detailing the governmental turmoil that surrounded Baum as he wrote *WWO*. The “relationships and analogies” connecting the book and the contemporary political situation are “far too consistent to be coincidental,” he claims (58). His thoughts on the Wizard himself are these: “The Wizard. . .hiding behind a façade of papier-mâché and noise, might be any President from Grant to McKinley” (54). He adds that the Wizard, like these Presidents, is (or appears to be) everything to everybody. But what is he really? Littlefield does not pursue this question, because
he, like other critics, is too far caught up in less essential matters. We can complete the thought through a close reading of the Wizard’s various manifestations. When Dorothy visits, the Wizard’s appearance of choice is a gigantic head, which inspires “wonder and fear” in her (The Wonderful Wizard 106). To the Tin Woodman, the Wizard plays “a most terrible Beast. . .a more dreadful looking monster could not be imagined” (110-11). Last of all, the Lion is met by a “Ball of Fire. . .fierce and glowing. . .the heat was so intense that it singed his whiskers” (112). The only exception to the Wizard’s display of intimidation and hostility is when he plays a beautiful woman for the Scarecrow. But the Scarecrow does not find any particular pleasure in this womanly beauty; on the contrary, he returns “sorrowfully,” like the others, and comments that “she needs a heart as much as the Tin Woodman” (110). If Dorothy and her friends represent the various social classes present in the year 1900, then by Littlefield’s interpretation it would appear that none of the Presidents from Grant to McKinley had anything but disappointment to offer their country.

One of the United States government’s great crimes and sources of shame is the way that Native Americans have been treated throughout the nation’s history. This specifically appears to have informed some plot elements in WWO. For example, Littlefield compares the Winged Monkeys to the Native Americans, but does not expound on the analogy (55). Ritter takes up the torch, repeating the same comparison and noting Baum’s “admiration for Native Americans” (185). The relationship between the United States and Native Americans is the only topic we know of that Baum was very vocal about, other than a long and complex discourse on feminism—this information stems from the records of the newspaper he owned, the Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer (Koupal). We receive more insight into Baum’s fictional and non-fictional political mindset from this source than almost any other.
Baum wrote several comments about Native Americans in his editorials, and these comments seem contradictory or at least paradoxical without the framework of WWO to consider them in. Shortly after the violent death of Sitting Bull, Sioux chief, Baum writes that “the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished, and what few are left are a pack of whining curs. . . . The Whites. . .are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians” (Hastings 2). In the same editorial, he calls them “grand Kings of the forest,” who have been “wronged” by “conquerors. . .marked in their dealings with [the Sioux] by selfishness, falsehood and treachery.” Ritter is correct in framing Baum’s sentiment as “admiration.” However, there is also a tone of scorn, not to mention the call for complete genocide. He seems to feel a romantic sentimentality for the Native Americans as history imagines them, and an eagerness to be rid of them as actual people. A short time later, following the Wounded Knee Massacre, Baum condemns the government for “employing so weak. . .a person as General Miles to look after the uneasy Indians” and bemoans America for “having wronged them for centuries” (Hastings 3). But, again, he calls for genocide. This mixture of admiration and hatred has troubled our memory of Baum for years; however, taking advantage of the metaphors provided in WWO, we can reconcile this paradox and come closer to an understanding of his true feelings.

The Winged Monkeys, the powerful but enslaved forest-dwellers of Oz, are a clear analogy to the relationship between the Native Americans and the criminal side of the American government. Hostile and impotent rulers were well-known to America by the time Baum began writing. Littlefield’s selected range of antagonistic Presidents (“from Grant to McKinley”) is rather arbitrary. With few notable exceptions, Grant’s predecessors were known for the same antagonistic behaviors. In fact, hostility toward the Native Americans is a historical fact that
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precedes the formation of America’s government, just as the enslavement of the Winged Monkeys is said to have occurred “many years ago, long before Oz [arrived]” (The Wonderful Wizard 143). Ritter sees this enslavement as “the threat of extermination. . .softened. . .to just exile and subordination” (187). She considers this equal to the displacement of the Native Americans.

The forced removal of the Native Americans from their homelands, commonly known as the Trail of Tears, was brought about by exactly the kind of administration that would have been at home in Oz. Though violence had been common between various native tribes and American settlers for centuries, the first President to attempt Native American genocide using direct legislation was Andrew Jackson, a man widely known and criticized for his “violent impulses” (Sturgis 34). Ignoring a Supreme Court ruling in favor of the Native Americans, he initiated military action that led to the displacement of several nations and the subsequent death of thousands of natives (60). This began the steady worsening of Native American relations, which culminated in the events that Baum editorialized so heavily. Jackson’s violent inhumanity was pivotal in generating the circumstances that informed Baum’s authorial politics.

We can see shadows of Jackson in Gayelette, a pre-Dorothy governmental figure and the person responsible for enslaving the Winged Monkeys. After being provoked by one of their practical jokes, Gayelette’s order is that “their wings should be tied and they should be. . .dropped in the river,” which would result in their death by drowning (144). We see this same instinct in the treatment of Native Americans at Wounded Knee, only ten years before WWO was published; incited by nothing more than an accidental gunshot, American soldiers opened fire on the Lakota tribe, killing almost 150 of them (Robertson and Frederick, 696). Eighteen of the soldiers involved later received Medals of Honor, indicating direct government
approval of their behavior (697). Though the Winged Monkeys fare better than the Lakota, they are still subjugated and forced to meet the requests of their designated overseer from that time forth. They seem to disappear when they’re not being used; perhaps they live on a reservation. Their actions are exactly as violent or as peaceful as the person who controls them—like these Monkeys, Baum sees the Native Americans as a powerful force, capable of great virtue or horrific damage. Thus, his certainty that they are a threat to the safety of every settler reflects on his feelings toward those who wear the golden cap, which in this case is the power of government. His mistrust for this government, then, is both apparent and reasonable.

The reader may seek for some redeeming quality, or some element of necessity, in the crimes performed by the governments of Oz; perhaps if the Land’s inhabitants are criminals and can only be controlled by a strict dictatorship, then their government’s actions could be forgiven. However, this proves to be irrefutably false. As Fred Erisman explains, the major traits of the people of Oz are nothing short of angelic. “In the Land of Oz,” he begins, “generosity is the basis of the entire economy” (617). There is no money, no bargaining, and no greed; the people share freely with each other. He adds that “the inhabitants relish simplicity,” and as a result none of them seek positions of power (618). They even “revel in work,” in the manual labor that the Wizard avoids categorically, and they find industry enjoyable (619). In short, they represent the “rural ideals of America. . . and the result is a pastoral utopia” (620). We can see this reflected in the way that strangers treat Dorothy and her friends. For example, as they near the Emerald City, they ask the matron of a farm for a place to stay the night. Though she does not know them and appears intimidated by the presence of the Lion, she quickly grants their request and volunteers a hearty meal as well (94-96). The people of Oz never depart from this standard; they are kind-hearted and good in every way that their governments are not. This is perhaps the strongest
evidence against the Wizard and Witch: their people need no government, and yet, after being placed amidst them by the winds of chance, their first instinct is to subjugate them and force an unnatural state of tyranny upon their utopian Oz-ciety. If this reflects Baum’s inner feelings about government, it casts an even darker shadow on those in positions of power. The implication is that humans are inherently good, generous beings, abused by governments in order to achieve selfish goals. Though only the foggiest of historical lenses could exactly equate this pastoral utopia of Oz to Native American society, we can judge from Baum’s “Kings of the Forest” rhetoric that he certainly sees in them a pristine and noble aspect that is lacking in white civilization. He finds their culture, in some way, superior to his own. The Native Americans of Baum’s time had no currency, relied heavily on their tight-knit social structure, and engaged in hard labor as a way of life, so their similarity to the Oz-dwellers is certainly notable.

Baum’s magical Land of Oz is uncomfortably similar to the way he saw the real world—not in terms of a simplistic parable or symbol, but in terms of actions and attitudes portrayed by their respective governments. Very little translation is required in order to see the resemblance. We can name several acts of violence, deceit, incompetence, displacement and irresponsibility displayed by the Wizard of Oz, the Wicked Witch of the West, and the great spider; each of these evokes a memory of the United States government’s violence and neglect toward Native Americans and toward their own constituents. Though it is doubtful that WWO was another attempt to editorialize about events that Baum had already spoken clearly about, we can be sure that he was strongly influenced by the politics of his time, and that he believed them to be dishonest and harmful. As readers, we are likely to be influenced by these feelings as we read. We may feel a greater resistance to government actions that threaten the well-being of minorities, and we may develop stronger empathy for those whom the government has harmed in
the past. If we consider these feelings wisely, we can hope to avoid being the next victims of the man behind the curtain.
Works Cited