

P. L. TRAVERS, WALT DISNEY,
AND THE MAKING OF *MARY POPPINS* *

M. THOMAS INGE
RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE, ASHLAND, VA, USA

ABSTRACT

When Walt Disney decided to adapt *Mary Poppins* for the screen in 1944, he began a fifteen-year process of negotiation with the author, P. L. Travers, that would result in generous terms that would make her wealthy for the rest of her life. However, she also complained about the film for decades after because she thought he had radically altered her creation. Most Travers fans and critics would argue the same, with none of them specifying exactly what the damaging changes were. An examination of the film and an analysis of Disney's *Mary Poppins* suggest that the British nanny is as mysterious a character as in the original and perhaps is even more subversive than critics have noted. *Mary Poppins* may arguably be not only a great Disney film but a fine motion picture that will continue to speak to generations.

KEYWORDS

literature into film; cultural studies; Pamela Lyndon Travers; *Mary Poppins* (book); Walt Disney; *Mary Poppins* (film)

Many of Walt Disney's decisions about what literature to adapt for the screen were based on a prior familiarity either through his own childhood reading or that of his immediate family.¹ Around 1943 his wife, Lilian, began to share the *Mary Poppins* books by Pamela Lyndon Travers with their daughters Diane and Sharon. According to one account, Disney overheard his daughters laughing with great delight over the magical British nanny's adventures. The entire family apparently joined forces to persuade Walt to make a film based on the books (which have no plots as such, being series of adventures and events in no particular order).

Walt sent his brother Roy to New York, where Travers was then living, to make an offer for the film rights, but she firmly rebuffed the offer, believing he would turn the work into a romantic, sentimental animated cartoon on the order of *Pinocchio* (1940) or *Bambi* (1942). She was, indeed, no great fan of

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1. The basic biographical data on Walt Disney can be found in Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), and Michael Barrier, *The Animated Man: A Life of Walt Disney* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

any of Disney's films and never had been. As early as 1938, in reviewing films for the journal *New English Weekly*, she denounced *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* as full of unctuous sanctimony and objected to the anthropomorphic nature of Mickey Mouse and other such animal creatures. Above the initials "P. T." she wrote,

Oh, he's clever, this Disney! From the depths of my misanthropy I admit it. Set a rabbit weeping, reveal a heart of pity beneath the tortoise shell, trump up a good deed for the adder and kind thoughts for the stoat and you have the password to the modern heart. And Disney knows it. The very pith of his secret is the enlargement of the animal world and a corresponding deflation of all human values. There is a profound cynicism at the root of his, as of all, sentimentality.²

The general myth is that in the next fifteen years Disney continued to court and doggedly persuade Travers until she reluctantly gave in and agreed to his offer in 1959. The truth seems to be that they were two wily negotiators who continued to offer and counteroffer until they had satisfactory terms with which they both could live. They were formidable opponents, and she was no naïve writer susceptible to the power and charm of Disney. She knew too that he was a highly successful moneymaker, whatever her disregard for his work.

Although Walt got the property and leeway he wanted, Travers got several unprecedented concessions from him: that she was to prepare a treatment or story outline herself for the film, with some latitude for adjustments by other writers and the producers in the process of production, and she would be consulted in such matters as casting and artistic details (she wanted, for example, an entirely British cast and accuracy in the English pronunciation of the period). What really sealed the deal, however, were the financial terms, the best possible she could extract from penny-wise Disney, a \$100,000 advance against a 5% royalty based on the studio's gross receipts. Travers had been financially insecure throughout her career, living modestly on proceeds from her periodical essays, journalism, and books (nine by then, with only the four *Mary Poppins* volumes bringing any reasonable income). Surely she suspected that if the project met the usual financial success of Disney productions, she would be fixed for life. She was correct, of course, and lived the life of a millionaire thereafter, even though her habitual conservative ways kept her from spending the money lavishly or fully relaxing into a sense of security. While the film cost \$5.2 million to make, it would gross nearly \$50 million worldwide in the first year and eventually earn over \$102 million down to the present.³

Always the expert at plot development, Disney marked up his copy of *Mary Poppins* fairly early, underlining those chapters he thought should be included in his first script version. The earlier draft of Travers included an ambitious seventeen episodes drawn from all of the first three books in the series. By

2. P. T. [Pamela Travers], "Snow-White," *New English Weekly*, April 21, 1938: 32.

3. See Neal Gabler, *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 600.

the time the shooting script was developed, only three chapters from the first volume had survived, with a few details drawn from other stories.

Travers was brought to Hollywood early on to talk with the writers, animators, and song writers about the script, thus fulfilling Disney's agreement to consult with her. While they engaged in friendly but often sharp discussion and disagreement during the days of the meetings, and they seemed to accede to her opinions, in the end the film version would show only a few traces of her demands. According to the transcripts of the conferences preserved in the Walt Disney Studio Archives, they especially struggled to agree on the symbolic meaning of Mary Poppins, what she did and why. The closest they could come to an agreement was that Mary Poppins arrives, has an effect on the Banks family, and leaves. The meaning of the word "fantasy" is discussed a good deal, and when they told Travers that the meaning of Mary Poppins is the personification of the miracle that is found in everyday life, she disagreed. She said, as paraphrased by her biographer, "There was no miracle in everyday life. Everyday life *was* the miracle."⁴

Moving through the book's twelve chapters, it becomes clear that Disney has omitted many interesting but digressive stories and situations in order to focus on the plot or elements that either further the narrative or provide interesting challenges to the techniques of combining live action with animation. Disney and his staff were always eager to further the art of animation and its unique technical possibilities, and they had pretty much mastered the methods of combining cartoon figures with live action in several earlier feature films, such as *The Three Caballeros* (1945) and *The Song of the South* (1946). Although he had promised Travers not to make the film into a fully animated one, he did not promise to exclude it entirely. Nearly everything that remains in the Disney script does find its origin or inspiration in the text, but it is reshaped or revised so as to support the larger theme that Mary Poppins operates as a force for good and saves the Banks family from remaining dysfunctional.

The Disney writers would draw mainly on the first book in the series, *Mary Poppins* (1934). In chapter 1 we learn that the Banks family resides in a simple, small house, poorly kept because they decided early on that they could only afford either to have a large family or a decent home. They chose the former. Disney would make them upper-middle-class, reduce the size of the family, and afford them a handsome house, still a bit beyond the means of a bank clerk, or whatever position he occupies at the bank. In chapter 2 Bert, the street artist, performer, and chimney sweep, makes his only appearance in the book, and with Mary he visits a fantasy world within his street chalk drawings, an event that gives rise to one of the most delightful sequences in the film. However, the children are not there with them in the book.

4. Valerie Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote: The Life of P. L. Travers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 254. Original italics.

The expansion of Bert's role would cause one of Travers's major concerns about the Disney script, and that would be to suggest any sort of romance between him and Mary. She repeatedly reiterated, "there would be no love affair between Mary and Bert, the pavement artist."⁵ The Disney script respects her wishes on this score, although they are clearly old acquaintances and friends. While the Disney artists would largely seek no inspiration in the original book illustrations by Mary Shepard (daughter of Ernest Shepard, illustrator of the Winnie the Pooh books), the film does appear to copy Bert's holiday clothes,⁶ but there are no penguin waiters, purely a Disney invention and a brilliantly successful one. Travers did not like it, however, as she disdained all Disney animation in general. At the premier opening of the film in Hollywood, she told Disney that the animation sequences should be the first things to go. He had to explain to her that no further modifications could be made as "the ship has already sailed."⁷

The visit with Uncle Wigg (Uncle Albert in the film) in chapter 3 and his levitation through laughter quite likely offered the kind of challenge the Disney staff could not resist, and they met it with great technical skill through wires and a rotating set. While it is conveyed as a concrete reality in the film, the text allows for the possibility that the entire sequence may have been but a dream on Mary's part.⁸ In the books, she repeatedly refuses to acknowledge that any of the fantastic events in which she was involved have actually happened.

While the dogs Andrew and his friend Willoughby from chapter 4 are retained in the film, Andrew's owner Miss Lark is largely omitted, and the dogs are reduced to secondary characters. Andrew's desire to be a low-class dog is also omitted in the film, and only Mary Poppins can communicate with him and understand dog-speak. Both chapters 5 and 6 contain sequences the Disney animators might have thoroughly enjoyed bringing to life—the story of the Red Dancing Cow and the trip around the world with Mary's magic compass—but both would have been irrelevant diversions from the progress of the plot. In the first edition of the book chapter 6 contained traditional ethnic stereotypes of African, Chinese, and Native American peoples, which by 1981 had grown embarrassing and had to be replaced by the publishers with non-controversial passages in the text. In the process, however, they overlooked another piece of ethnic stereotyping in chapter 4, where it remains to this day. The unruly street children are referred to as wild "Arabs."⁹

The story of the Bird Woman in chapter 7 was another deletion, although the figure herself would be retained as a central image of the power of charity

5. Quoted in Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 254.

6. See P. L. Travers, *Mary Poppins*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 25.

7. Caitlin Flanagan, "Becoming Mary Poppins: P. L. Travers, Walt Disney, and the Making of a Myth," *New Yorker*, December 19, 2005: 46.

8. See Travers, *Mary Poppins*, 45–48.

9. Travers, *Mary Poppins*, 53.

in the film and set the stage for the climax of the plot. The artists appear to have borrowed a couple of images of the Bird Woman for the film from the Shepard illustrations as well.¹⁰

The next two chapters, 8 and 9, had to go, and one can guess that it was with regret as they are two of the most charming in the book. Mrs. Cory and her tall daughters, Annie and Fannie, their gingerbread shop, and their practice of pasting the paper stars in the sky were reduced to a very brief appearance at Bert's street performance at the beginning of the film. When the producers reduced the size of the Banks family, no doubt for the sake of simplicity, the twins John and Barbara were left out, along with the delightful story in chapter 9 about how babies can understand the language of animals and nature but forget it by the time they are age one.

The dance of the animals around the Great Chain on Mary Poppins's birthday in chapter 10 might have made an engaging sequence for the film, as would the subversive scene of caged human beings visited by animals in the zoo. In fact, Disney intended to include the zoo scene and created a story board and a song for it, but later they decided the film was long enough already and dropped it. One cannot help but wonder if someone on the creative staff would recall the Great Chain some years later when a similar image became central to *The Lion King*. None of chapter 11, about the child star Maia, who appears as the children are Christmas shopping, was used, even though generosity and charity are central themes in both book and film.

In the final chapter Mary Poppins leaves with the arrival of the West Wind on the first day of spring, but with a major difference from the film. Here she has accomplished few revolutions or changes in the Banks family, nor has she fully restored familial harmony. Of course, in practical terms, Travers was leaving the door open for further books about her character, so Mary's "au revoir" signaled a certain return someday.

Once the plot was stripped to its bare essentials, the writers, artists, and production team could begin to focus on the very important issue of character for the major figures. A great deal of creativity and imagination would go into filling out the details, with more Disney and less Travers being evident. Like nearly all Disney films, *Mary Poppins* would come down solidly on the side of family values and underline the prime importance of the family in the social scheme of things. Yet the film would retain a good many of the subversive edges of the original and finally come to question many traditional values and assumptions.

Mrs. Banks is made into an early feminist, or suffragette in the terminology of that time, 1910. But at the beginning of the film Mr. Banks arrives to assert his authority over the home through discipline, organization, and ideas derived from the business practices in time efficiency and scientific management promoted by Frederick Winslow Taylor (note the song lyrics for "The Life I Lead": "I run my home precisely on schedule / At 6:01 I march

10. See Travers, *Mary Poppins*, 105 and 110.

through my door"¹¹). By the end of the film, Mrs. Banks abandons feminism in exchange for family unity and stability, quite likely a reflection of Disney's own position. He admired women and employed them at the Studio, but he had a fairly traditional attitude to their place in the scheme of things.

After the resignation of the former nanny, the children write a letter laying out their requirements for a new nanny. When Mr. Banks tears it up and throws it into the fireplace, the pieces float upward and apparently reach Mary Poppins. Thus she comes not by circumstance but by direct request. She floats in from the sky, to the surprise of the children. Her sliding up the bannister also startles them, as does her magical telekinetic method of organizing the room and her bottomless carpet bag which holds her possessions. Her first task seems to be to make necessary jobs and work appear to be fun—"A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down."

The children's first day out with Mary leads to a trip into the fantasy sidewalk chalk world of Bert, the street artist. Even Bert can do "a bit of magic," he claims, although Mary has to step in to complete it for their adventure into the countryside. "It's a jolly holiday with Mary," no matter where they are. Here we see the more human face of Mary, who is usually a stern disciplinarian. It's a jolly holiday with Bert, because he treats ladies with respect. He never "pushes his advantage with women," we are told. What this message should mean for the children in the audience is not clear, but quite likely Travers's injunction against any sort of romance between the two is at play here.

Mary is not to be domesticated or forced into traditional female roles, except that of a nanny, and as in the books, there is a degree of the subversive in her. During the countryside scene, as commoners, Mary and Bert save the fox from the hounds and thereby contradict aristocratic privilege. Is not the song about the word "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" to some degree subversive of standard English in its appeal to linguistic extremity? This subversive fantasy is finally interrupted by rain from the real world.

Things become what Mary Poppins wants them to be, like the various flavors of medicine from the same bottle. She asserts her will over things in the face of natural law and inevitability. Does she control nature, or is she a natural law unto herself? The Uncle who floats when he laughs defies the law of gravity, a power Mary too demonstrates in the scene. She and Bert provide a brief dissertation on types of laughter. While gravity and sadness hold things down, laughter frees and liberates us from worldly concerns. That laughter is generally subversive in its nature seems to be the message. Sadness brings the group back down to the ground as Mary announces "It's time to go home."

Mr. Banks calls Mary on the carpet because these activities are not fraught with purpose and practicality. He calls it "sugary female thinking." But they are learning important lessons indeed. Through Mary the children become invested with a sympathy for the poor and homeless when she sings the song

11. Robert Stevenson, dir., *Mary Poppins* (Walt Disney, 1964).

about the Bird Woman, “Feed the Birds” (reportedly Walt Disney’s favorite song for the rest of his life). It is their sympathy for the actual Bird Woman that causes the children to subvert the entire banking system by withholding their two pence from investment in the bank. Is it not more profitable to invest in human beings and nature than in savings accounts?

By joining Bert in his rooftop dance with the chimney sweeps, the children are joining forces with the working class in their carnival celebration at the margins of society outside mainstream life. All of London, viewed by them from the top of Big Ben, is at their disposal and purview rather than those of the upper classes. Their authority results from “stepping in time” outside the boundaries of society into their own shadowy and sooty world. The two worlds merge when the dirty dancers invade the interior space of Mr. Banks’s home. By shaking his hand, they have passed on the traditional luck of the chimney sweep, although he is about to be fired by the officers of the bank. It is Bert, the outsider, who advises him that his devotion to work and duty has robbed him of the opportunity to know his children and has skewed his priorities from the paternal to the material.

The act of withholding the two pence is compared in the film with the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution and causes a bank panic. In retaliation the officers dismiss Banks from the brotherhood of bankers by turning his umbrella, the mark of a British gentleman, inside out, and puncturing his iconic bowler hat. In retaliation he uses the joke about a “leg named Smith” and the “super” word to challenge their jurisdiction and dismissal. Mr. Banks has discovered the joys of the subversive and carnival. But his respectability is still sound, as indicated by the report of the policeman on the phone when Banks finally returns home after a search for him. There has been “no hanky panky, if you know what I mean”—no sexual dalliance, in other words.

The two pence are finally used to buy material for a kite, which leads the family into the park, where family unity is established and solidified. Mrs. Banks discards her feminism in favor of domestic unity. Her work done—bringing the family back together again—Mary Poppins departs as she came, by flight into the skies. This mysterious stranger leaves the community better than she found it.

Mary Poppins belongs to the tradition of the outsider or what Mark Twain called the “mysterious stranger,” a popular theme found in American and British literature. Roy R. Male has described the typical pattern as follows: “Into an isolated setting intrude one or more mysterious strangers who are potential saviors, potential destroyers, or ambiguous combinations of both. There then occurs some form of transaction between the external and the internal, a testing or transformation of the insiders by the intruder(s). . . . Then the stranger usually departs—sometimes from this world—leaving the insider(s) to ponder the significance of the experience.”¹² Examples of

12. Roy R. Male, *Enter, Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 10.

such fiction include Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel," Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers," William Faulkner's "Spotted Horses," and Katherine Anne Porter's "Noon Wine," as well as many western films, such as *High Noon* (1952, dir. Fred Zinnemann) or *Shane* (1953, dir. George Stevens).

While they may not have been aware of these precedents, that a pattern of this kind emerged in the discussions between the Disney production team and Travers is indicated by an exchange that took place on April 6, 1961, as recorded in one of the studio transcripts. Travers says, "Somebody gave me a good interpretation of Mary Poppins last night—put it to me rather—that this family at the end of every one of the books is together, happily—Mary Poppins is always alone—nobody goes with her. She needs nobody, she's a catalyst—unchangeable but she exacts change." To this song writer Robert Sherman replies in agreement, "Mary Poppins sees an unhappy family—arrives and through her presence shows this family how to understand each other and the world around—when she succeeds, she leaves."¹³ Actually, the film follows this pattern more clearly because Mary Poppins arrives and departs in only the first three books in the series. The following four volumes are really without structure and are composed of collections of short narratives, more in the line of addenda than sequels.

Exactly who is Mary Poppins, or more properly, *what* is Mary Poppins? She is clearly more than your usual nanny of fact and fiction. Is she a witch of the benign variety, a good fairy, a magician, a sybil, a goddess, a supernatural spirit, a shape-shifter, a dragon in disguise—all figures with which she shares certain powers? It is difficult to associate her specifically with any of the special creations of myth and legend, although one Danish scholar has written an entire monograph in an effort to do so, only to conclude, "Her origins are obscure, but it is hinted that she enjoys the protection of higher powers, that she understands the language of animals and that between her visits to mortals she returns to her secret source. In these respects, she is similar to the heroes, heroines and demigods of mythological poems and tales."¹⁴

Travers said explicitly that she is *not* a fairy.¹⁵ Valerie Lawson suggests, "An adult looking for deeper meaning in the books will understand that Mary Poppins lives in a land where religion, fairy tale, and myth combine. Despite her knowledge, she does not moralize, but simply allows the Banks children to experience mysterious other worlds. She tells parables and allegories."¹⁶ When readers asked for an explanation of Mary, Travers usually replied, "You tell me."¹⁷ On one occasion she said, "I don't not explain because I'm too proud

13. Walt Disney Studios, Typescript of Conversations with P. L. Travers, April 6, 1961, Production 1872: 15.

14. Staffan Bergsten, *Mary Poppins and Myth* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1978), 17.

15. See Travers, *Mary Poppins*, 162.

16. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 155.

17. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 145–46.

to explain, because if I did explain, where would we be?"¹⁸ Perhaps she is all the wise women of the world of fantasy and fairy tale.

Whatever her identity or mythic origins, Mary Poppins's characteristics are distinctly clear. She is highly independent and indomitable and values no one's opinion as highly as her own. She is firm but never to the point of rudeness. She is very sensitive to the needs and point of view of children, thus her splendid success as a nanny. She knows herself and has a firm sense of identity, and she frequently displays a sense of vanity, as when she views herself in a plate glass window while shopping.¹⁹ While some have claimed that she was dramatically altered by Disney in the film and made into a sweeter character, on the whole, all of her original characteristics are retained in one scene or another. Disney does make her into a slightly more subversive character in her challenges to traditional institutions in terms of class and economics and standards of behavior in early twentieth-century England. Julie Andrews is a younger and more attractive version of the original, but that adds to the charm of the film.

Interestingly enough, in the changes Disney made in his adaptation of the books, he actually moved the plot closer to the life and experience of Travers herself. She grew up in a household that was neither warm nor supportive, her mother and father caught up in their own needs and self-importance. She lived alternately with her parents and Great Aunt Ellie from her mother's side, and, according to her biographer, "None of the three was direct with her, none supported her wholeheartedly."²⁰ Both sides of the family were commercial and business people, and her father was a banker who was demoted in 1902 from being a manager to the position of a mere bank clerk, like the Mr. Banks of the movie.²¹ Travers learned self-sufficiency and financial discipline very early and never knew the pleasure of a loving and friendly family. While these experiences do not inform the fictional world of Mary Poppins, the film would move the restoration of family values to the center of the plot and make the father figure into a penurious and strict money handler instead of a marginally successful banker. Travers seems not to have taken notice of these subtle changes, however.

Curiously, perhaps concerned about what she might do or say, the Disney staff did not invite Travers to the premiere of the film on August 27, 1964, so she undertook to invite herself and flew out the day before with the financial support of her publisher. Although happy over the publicity and wealth the success of the film would bring, she would play a duplicitous game with her actual opinion of it in the following decades. After viewing the film for the first time, she said that it was "a splendid film and very well cast," and she

18. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 158.

19. See Travers, *Mary Poppins*, 177–78.

20. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 24.

21. See Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 29–30.

sent a note to Disney praising it as “splendid, gay, generous, and wonderfully pretty.”²²

The reviews in the following days were overwhelmingly positive when not highly enthusiastic, with competitor Samuel Goldwyn, whose *My Fair Lady* was to open a month later, calling it “A motion picture which writes a new page in motion picture history.”²³ Hollis Alpert, writing in the *Saturday Review*, called it “one of the most magnificent pieces of entertainment ever to come from Hollywood.”²⁴ *Mary Poppins* would receive thirteen Academy Award nominations and win in five categories, including Best Actress, Film Editing, Original Score, Song, and Special Effects.²⁵ Many felt that it should have been selected as Best Film.

In the numerous interviews that would follow, and in personal letters to friends, Travers would tend to praise the film, but she would add notes to her copies of the letters indicating that she was writing in a satirical or ironic tone. These, she knew, would be seen by future researchers. The assumption is that she was being politic in the hope that Disney would make a sequel or allow a stage musical based on the books or film to be produced. Her actual opinion may have been closer to what she wrote her London publisher, that the film captured little of the essence of the books and it was “Disney through and through, spectacular, colourful, gorgeous but all wrapped around mediocrity of thought, poor glimmerings of understanding and oversimplification.”²⁶

It seems that every critic, commentator, and fan of the work of Pamela Travers finds it necessary to disparage the Disney version in no uncertain terms, almost in the same words used by Travers herself. Patricia Demers, author of the only sustained critical study of Travers’s work, found the film “trivializing”²⁷ and was saddened by the “use of cartooned figures to translate and invariably reduce the fantasy.”²⁸ Since none of the central characters were animated or “cartooned” in the film, one wonders what she means by this. It may be a reflection of the age-old canard that reading a book leaves more to the imagination than a film or picture and that the printed word is superior to the visual image.

For Travers’s biographer, Valerie Lawson, “Disney seized upon the fantasy world of books but eliminated their mystery. He made a film of no ambivalence, no depth, and very little sadness.”²⁹ Yet the screen version of *Mary Poppins* seems to retain a good deal of ambivalence and mystery, as well as a degree of solemnity, if not sadness (note the way she brings the

22. Quoted in Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 273.

23. Quoted in Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 274.

24. Hollis Alpert, “Mary Poppins to the Rescue,” *Saturday Review*, August 22, 1964: 22. Quoted in Leonard Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Disney Editions, 2000), 231.

25. See Maltin, *The Disney Films*, 238.

26. Quoted in Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 274.

27. Patricia Demers, *P. L. Travers* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), 11.

28. Demers, *P. L. Travers*, 81.

29. Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 245.

laughter scene to a halt). Another critic, Giorgia Grilli, claims that “The Disney film significantly altered the character of Mary Poppins in its portrayal of her”³⁰ and “reduced her intriguing nature to a spoonful of sugar and much frivolity.”³¹ Yet none of the critics actually support their claims by a close analysis of the film itself. It is as if the name Disney alone is all that needs to be said, given the general bias and prejudice his films elicit in the academic world and elitist circles. I would argue that a close examination of the film reveals a much more complex and challenging, if not subversive figure, in Mary Poppins.

Travers’s major complaint testified to her vanity. She was upset by billboards and publicity that called the film “Walt Disney’s *Mary Poppins*.” She said they should have announced “P. L. Travers’ *Mary Poppins*, screened by Disney.”³² In her honest moments, she would admit that she greatly enjoyed the fame the film brought her and the income that allowed her to write more books, including several more about Mary Poppins.³³ Her opinion aside, Disney’s *Mary Poppins* has demonstrated a staying power that speaks to generation after generation of moviegoers. On the American Film Institute’s list of the Greatest Movie Musicals ever made, it ranks sixth. It has garnered respect as not only a great Disney film but a fine motion picture in its own right.

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30. Giorgia Grilli, *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning in Mary Poppins: The Governess as Provocateur*, trans. Jennifer Varney (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

31. Grilli, *Myth, Symbol, and Meaning in Mary Poppins*, xv.

32. Quoted in Lawson, *Mary Poppins, She Wrote*, 277.

33. The complete list of Mary Poppins books included *Mary Poppins* (1934), *Mary Poppins Comes Back* (1935), *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1944), *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952), *Mary Poppins from A to Z* (1963), *Mary Poppins in the Kitchen* (1975), *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane* (1982), and *Mary Poppins in the House Next Door* (1989). Only the first four were in print when Disney began work on the film.

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ADDRESS

M. Thomas Inge
Randolph-Macon College
P. O. Box 5005
Ashland, VA 23005-5505
USA

tinge@rmc.edu

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The *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film* is a Czech scholarly journal whose objective is to be a platform for an intersection of literary and film history, criticism, and theory. The journal examines literatures and films in any language, thus merging both regional and universal themes. The journal is published in English, is peer-reviewed, and has two issues a year.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLES

M. Thomas Inge

P. L. Travers, Walt Disney, and the Making of *Mary Poppins* 5

Brad Vice

Barry Hannah: In the Academy but Not of It 17

Šárka Bubíková

Growing Up Barbadian American: Assimilation, Ethnicity and Identity
in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* by Paule Marshall 37

Michaela Weiss

Tipping the History: Gender Performances and Costumes That Matter
in Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* 51

Ondřej Pilný

Pop Music and Politics in Drama: Stewart Parker and Tom Stoppard 63

Joanna Diane Caytas

Nostalgia and Condemnation of the Past
in Post-Stalinist Czech Novels 73

BOOK REVIEWS

*E pluribus unum or E pluribus plura? Unity and Diversity in American
Culture*, edited by Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, David Mauk, and Ole Moen
(reviewed by Gregory Jason Bell) 89

Reading Philip Roth's American Pastoral, edited by Velichka D. Ivanova
(reviewed by Josef Jařab) 96

The Death of the Critic, by Rónán McDonald
(reviewed by Michal Kleprlík) 99