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Elizabeth Davis

Fresno Pacific University
California Zeta Chapter

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Abstract

This paper addresses the feminist themes of Dorothy's adventure and return to Kansas in L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Some feminist scholars express a sense of ambivalence toward her choice to go home due to the domestic nature of life in the Kansas she returns to; however, I argue that Dorothy's return is empowering, allowing her to expand her definition of womanhood by finding a balance between domesticity and female authority, rather than considering them mutually exclusive characteristics. In this paper, I will first explore two of the minor female characters Dorothy encounters as she travels through Oz—the Stork and the Queen of Field Mice—examining the agency and authority they model through their brief interactions with the protagonist. I will then turn to a brief analysis of the work of Baum's mother-in-law, feminist icon Matilda Joslyn Gage, locating the direct connections between Gage's ideas and Baum's story. Finally, I will take a close look at the famous silver shoes that eventually carry Dorothy home, identifying how they function in Dorothy's journey of self-actualization and why they are the key to her empowering return. This paper contributes to discussions in feminism and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, working to fill a gap in scholarship by addressing both feminist symbols in the text and Baum's interaction with and extension of feminist ideas.

Keywords: *Feminism, Dorothy, Wizard of Oz, L. Frank Baum, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Silver Shoes*

Suffragette leader Matilda Joslyn Gage once wrote, “woman is learning for herself that not self-sacrifice, but self-development, is her first duty in life” (240). Less than a decade after these words were published, her son-in-law, L. Frank Baum, would create a female main character who experiences this kind of self-development in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The young protagonist, Dorothy, embarks on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment through the mystical land of Oz, ultimately deciding to leave and return to her home in Kansas. This choice “is something about which many women have felt some ambivalence” (Clark 143), raising questions about the feminist messages embedded in Dorothy’s story and the extent of her development as an empowered young woman. Can Dorothy be a feminist if she returns to Kansas? Or, on the larger scale, is re-entering domestic life considered a failure for the empowered woman?

Although there is plenty of scholarship surrounding the *Oz* series and spinoffs associated with it, few analyses focus solely on *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and Dorothy’s journey. Alissa Burger, as one example, argues that Dorothy is an “accidental adventurer,” and her return to domestic Kansas is antifeminist, conforming to societal norms: “Her desire to return home reaffirms her traditional gender role” (125). However, other critics find Dorothy’s return a more empowering move, making connections between Baum’s work and feminist ideas of agency and empowerment. For example, Paula Kent believes Dorothy’s choice serves as a positive life lesson for readers: “If young girls or women in the ‘real world’ come across Dorothy’s adventure, they can see that she was able to make it home, and she is stronger because of what she had to endure” (186). Other critics draw connections between *Oz* and feminism through Baum’s relationship with his mother-in-law, Gage. Alan Elms says, “The pervasive tone of female power in the *Oz* books . . . must have received a powerful boost from his adult experiences” (156), a claim he uses to argue that Gage must have influenced the *Oz* story in some way. Therefore, scholarship on *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* largely focuses either on the feminist symbols and themes in Dorothy’s journey or the real-world feminist influences in Baum’s life; however, these two are not commonly intertwined in analyses of this text.

This paper aims to bridge this gap by exploring *both* feminist symbols and Baum’s feminist influences, examining the characters Dorothy encounters in *Oz*, Baum’s direct connection to and extension of feminist ideas, and the symbolism of Dorothy’s silver shoes. As a result, I argue that Dorothy’s return to Kansas is empowering

because it allows her to expand what it means to be a woman by allowing feminist authority and domestic life to co-exist, instead of choosing one or the other.

In her travels through *Oz*, Dorothy is influenced by other female characters who teach her to develop her definition of womanhood through their actions. The first of these is a stork, whom Dorothy and her companions encounter while on their initial journey to see the Wizard. As they make their way to the Emerald City, they attempt to cross a river on a handmade raft; however, they get pulled off-course by the current, and the Scarecrow is ultimately abandoned on a pole in the middle of the water. As the others try to find a way to rescue him, a female stork approaches and, after hearing the Scarecrow’s plight, offers to help him across: “‘Well, I’ll try,’ said the Stork, ‘but if I find he is too heavy to carry I shall have to drop him in the river again’” (Baum 68). The Stork is an independent and assertive character who offers help when needed but does not overexert herself in the process. Her initial statement of “I’ll try” allows her to acknowledge her limits, but the conditional statement that follows establishes her control and sets her in a position of power over the situation. She teaches both Dorothy and young female readers the valuable lesson that a woman does not have to exceed her limits to help someone, and she does not have to make sacrifices for the benefit of others. Just a few moments later, the Stork demonstrates that this independent, assertive attitude can coexist with a domestic life: as soon as she has helped the Scarecrow, the stork tells Dorothy, “I must go now, for my babies are waiting in the nest for me” (69). Here readers see that the same woman who does not feel an obligation to help others *does* feel an obligation to her household. The independent and domestic sides of the Stork are balanced in a way that teaches Dorothy a new meaning of womanhood, one that reconciles the authoritative and nurturing qualities that are often viewed as distinct categories.

Shortly after encountering the Stork, the group meets another positive female role model: the Queen of Field Mice, who exhibits full empowerment as a leader. The Tin Woodman saves her from a wildcat, and when she thanks him, he comments that he will help anyone, even if they are only a mouse. To this, she responds, “‘Only a mouse! . . . Why, I am a Queen—the Queen of all the Field Mice!’” (74). Immediately after this, the Tin Woodman bows in an act of respect, acknowledging her status as a leader. Regardless of her need for help,

the Queen asserts herself as the authority figure in the situation, and the Tin Woodman's bow models an acceptance of this authority. She is further proven to be a powerful figure as thousands of mice run to her to make sure she is safe. When they approach her, they bow "so low to the little Queen that they almost [stand] upon their heads" (74). Her power is so revered that it upends her subjects—they bow so low that they almost physically turn upside down. These characteristics create a dynamic that offers an alternative structure of power—an upside-down version rooted not in force but in care—a female-led structure that was heavily influenced by Baum's mother-in-law, Matilda Joslyn Gage.

Matilda Joslyn Gage was a prominent figure of first-wave feminism, working closely with other suffragettes such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. She coauthored volumes of *The History of Woman Suffrage* and wrote her own books and essays, which typically focused on criticizing the church's treatment of women and oppressive patriarchal structures. In her most significant contribution, *Woman, Church, and State*, Gage explores what she calls "the Matriarchate," a woman-ruled societal system she locates in many ancient communities. For Gage, the Matriarchate subverts the idea that society was founded on patriarchal roots and suggests an alternative origin for the modern world: "Thus to the Matriarchate or Mother-rule is the modern world indebted for its first conception of inherent rights, natural equality of condition, and the establishment of a civilized government upon this basis" (45). Gage is not suggesting an alternate history of the physical creation of society as we know it; rather, she is pointing out that the best parts of modern culture—such as "inherent rights," "equality," and "civilized government"—originate in the practices of the Matriarchate. Later, she takes it a step further by saying, "This Motherhood has always and everywhere been the preserver and creator of the omnipresent life of all kinds which fills the throbbing universe" (72). According to Gage's view of the world, women are the maternal powerhouse of society. In fact, they almost reach a god-like status in her argument, especially when given the titles "preserver and creator" of life.

With women held in this high regard, Gage expressed resentment against systems that seemed to oppress women in any way, especially the church, "[t]he most stupendous system of organized robbery . . . towards women, a robbery that has not only taken her

self-respect but all rights of person" (238). She was unwavering in this criticism against the church, which ultimately played a large role in her erasure from the feminist movement. When Anthony and Stanton wanted to align with the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Gage showed strong opposition to joining any association that was affiliated with the church. This firm resistance caused her to lose her prominent position as a feminist leader and be "purged from her organization" (Fenton 34). Still, it did not cause her to change her stance against patriarchy of all forms.

Gage held a reputation as a radical feminist until her death in 1898. Just two years later, in the spring of 1900, Baum published *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Gage had lived with Baum and his wife for a short period of time after her husband's death (Elms 156). As a critic of the church himself, Baum found a lot of common ground with his mother-in-law, including similar beliefs about women's rights (Hearn xxiii). Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that Gage's Matriarchate is found embodied in Baum's Queen of Field Mice. The Queen has established a civilized system where she is the central power and sole authority, extremely revered by her subjects. She is also presented as equal to—if not more powerful than—the Tin Woodman, who bows to her in respect. The authoritative, egalitarian positioning of the Queen parallels the qualities of Gage's Matriarchate. However, Baum complicates Gage's concept by making the Queen a minor character—though she is the most powerful figure in her field, she is not the most powerful figure in the story. The Matriarchate is forced to exist within a larger patriarchal structure whose power is found in the Wizard's control over Oz. The Queen is an effective representation of the Matriarchate, but Baum shows that even this system cannot escape the oppression of patriarchy. By doing so, he both reflects and expands on Gage's arguments.

Clearly, Baum was influenced by the feminist ideas of his time, but portions of Dorothy's journey—specifically the women she meets who teach her about agency, authority, and a willingness to accept help—anticipate later feminist principles. Recent feminist scholarship addresses similar ideas. For example, Sarah Ahmed discusses the obedience (or "willingness") of young girls in children's stories and how those depictions can be dangerous. In her critique of a Grimm story, she says, "A willing girl . . . is willing to obey, which is to say, she does not have a will of her own. . . . [T]he story

is a warning of the consequences of not being willing to obey” (Ahmed 68). Ahmed points out that too often, young girls find protagonists who fall into this category of “willful obedience” with no will of their own. The Stork and Queen contradict this, however, showing a powerful will that allows them to be authoritative and independent, which directly impacts Dorothy, who begins to exhibit her own will as time goes on. Ironically, her ultimate willful decision is choosing to leave Oz and return to Kansas, which subverts expectations and allows her to embrace her agency fully. She is not the willfully obedient protagonist Ahmed warns against; instead, she exhibits strength and independence as she accepts her authority as a woman.

After examining the actions of other female characters and the influences surrounding Baum, it is clear that this text is heavily impacted by feminist ideas. Still, the effect of these ideas would be weakened if Dorothy did not take empowering actions herself. The major decision that establishes Dorothy as a feminist character is her choice to return to Kansas. But how can a return to domesticity be liberating? The answer to this question will come through exploring the development of Dorothy’s power, which is symbolized in a very small form: a pair of silver shoes. These shoes are offered to Dorothy as a gift when she first arrives in Oz after her house crushes their previous owner, the Wicked Witch of the East. The munchkins tell her, “there is some charm connected with them; but what it is we never knew” (Baum 13). Dorothy ignores the shoes at first, placing them on the table and walking away; however, she later puts them on before she begins her journey and discovers that they fit her perfectly. The silver shoes continue to carry this mysterious “magical charm” (98) as she moves through Oz, but their real power is not revealed until the climactic moment of Dorothy’s being captured by the Wicked Witch of the West.

After several attempts to kill Dorothy and her companions, the Witch is finally successful in capturing her with the help of her winged monkeys. She is startled, however, when the monkeys bring Dorothy to her with the silver shoes on her feet—in fact, she “trembles with fear” at the sight of them (116). The Witch’s knowledge of their power is more extensive than that of the others, and she quickly plots to steal them and claim their charm for herself: “But if she could only get hold of the Silver Shoes, they would give her more power than all the other things she had lost” (119). Interest-

ly, this is the first time “Silver Shoes” is a capitalized phrase—the Witch prescribes a new significance to the shoes by giving them an official title. In an attempt to take their power away from Dorothy, she forces her to perform household chores until she can find a way to steal them. The Witch is eventually successful when she trips Dorothy and gains possession of one. As she puts it on, she celebrates that she now has “half the power of their charm” (120). This act enrages Dorothy, who tells the Witch, “You are a wicked creature! . . . You have no right to take my shoe from me” (120). In this outburst of anger, Dorothy throws a bucket of water on the Witch, accidentally melting her as a result. Dorothy is apologetic about the Witch’s death, but it is not long before she carries on and leaves the Witch behind.

The Witch’s demise is a very sudden incident, and the scene itself is quite bizarre. As a result, Dorothy’s impulsive choice to throw water on the Witch has led scholars to several interpretations of this scene and the implications it has. Henry Littlefield argues that the Witch’s death acts as an agricultural metaphor: “Dorothy destroys the evil Witch by angrily dousing her with a bucket of water . . . which the drought-ridden farmers on the great plains needed so badly, and which if correctly used could create an agricultural paradise, or at least dissolve a wicked witch” (56). This interpretation has become a popular reading of this scene among scholars, especially those looking to read the book as an economic or political allegory. Feminist critics, however, read the Witch as a different kind of allegorical character. Kristin Taylor, for example, claims that the Witch “embodies the forces, both external and self-imposed, that seek to keep Dorothy from recognizing her own agency” (390). Here, the Witch’s death is read as Dorothy’s removing a major obstacle blocking her independence, which has become one of the other major interpretations of this scene. Suzanne Rahn takes this a step further by highlighting the importance of Dorothy’s shoes in her defeat of the Witch: “She seems to realize instinctively that the Witch’s theft of her shoes will rob her of something essential to herself, and her sense of outrage is stronger than her fear of the Witch” (63). Regardless of the symbolism of the Witch’s character or the allegorical interpretation of her capture of Dorothy, the most significant element of this scene is Dorothy’s rescue of her shoe: Dorothy’s act of reclaiming the stolen silver shoe once again exhibits the willfulness discussed by Sara Ahmed. Ahmed claims, “Any will is a willful will if you are not

supposed to have a will of your own” (78). Dorothy’s willfulness is brought to light when she fights for her shoe and rescues it from the Witch.

Not only does the death of the Wicked Witch demonstrate Dorothy’s willful action, but the shoe itself has great importance and meaning. Almost immediately after the Witch dies, Dorothy’s attention returns to the important shoe: “After picking out the silver shoe, which was all that was left of the old woman, she cleaned and dried it with a cloth, and put it on her foot again” (Baum 121). It is interesting to note the wording used to describe how the shoe is all that remains from the “old woman.” At first, this description seems to refer to the Witch herself, with “old” referring to her age; however, upon closer inspection, the “old woman” can be read as a contrast to the “new woman,” the feminist concept that was gaining popularity as Baum wrote this book. This new woman rejected the entrapment of domestic life to pursue an independent lifestyle; nevertheless, new women were criticized by some writers as “leading empty, unfulfilling, and melancholy lives” (Rzepka 58). Against this characterization, Baum uses Dorothy’s liberation from the Witch as a way of celebrating the principles of the new woman instead of criticizing them. Dorothy escapes the domestic prison she was trapped in and eliminates her oppressor, which allows her to embrace the independence that comes with being a new woman and literally melt away the old. She takes the shoe back from the old woman because it will serve as a significant reminder of the transformation that took place when she removed the Witch from her life and embraced independence.

Dorothy’s reclamation of the silver shoes reveals that the charm surrounding them goes further than their magical qualities—their real charm lies in the female authority they represent. This authority is handed to Dorothy when she first arrives in Oz, but she does not realize that she can claim it for herself. Instead, she passively carries the authority with her until the Witch tries to take it away. When a portion of it is stolen, she overthrows her oppressor to protect her authority, and a transformation to being a new woman takes place in her life. By reclaiming the shoe, she officially acknowledges the authority she has, which serves as an important moment of empowerment in her story.

The final step in Dorothy’s self-actualization comes when Glinda—another woman confident in her own authority—explains that Dorothy has had the power to

return home within her all along: all she had to do was click her heels together three times to be taken anywhere in the world. Glinda tells Dorothy, “If you had known their power you could have gone back to your Aunt Em the very first day you came to this country” (Baum 201). The key to this transformation is Dorothy’s developing confidence in herself and her ability to claim authority as a woman. While Dorothy had the power to return home all along, prior to her meeting with Glinda, she lacked insight into the importance of using this power and the effects it could have on others. This lack of insight is reflected in her initial explanation of why she wants to return to Kansas: “I am anxious to get back to my aunt and uncle, for I am sure they will worry about me” (13). The reasoning Dorothy provides in this earlier scene is a self-centered view of her situation. She focuses on her own anxiety and the fact that her aunt and uncle will worry about *her*. She is presented as helpless, concerned with finding a way back to the comfort of a home she is familiar with. Although she is presented with the shoes and the authority that comes with them, she does not yet have the confidence within herself to use that authority and return on her own. However, by the end of her journey, when she finally recognizes the power she has, her request to return home shifts and reflects a new motivation. She tells Glinda, “My greatest wish now . . . is to get back to Kansas, for Aunt Em will surely think something dreadful has happened to me, and that will make her put on mourning; and unless the crops are better this year than they were last, I am sure Uncle Henry cannot afford it” (199). Instead of a distressed, anxious plea to find comfort again, Dorothy has matured and realized the chain reaction that could occur in her family as a result of her absence, affecting them emotionally and economically.

After several tearful goodbyes to her companions, Dorothy follows Glinda’s instructions. She clicks her heels three times and says, “Take me home to Aunt Em!” (203). She is instantly carried through the air in a whirlwind, and before she knows it, she has landed in Kansas. When she stands up, she discovers that the shoes “had fallen off in her flight through the air, and were lost forever in the desert” (204). Having served their purpose, the shoes are no longer needed, and Dorothy is able to return home without them. This internal change is solidified by the fact that the shoes fall off during her return to Kansas: Dorothy does not need an object to give her power, strength, or agency—she develops these

attributes within herself and is able to hold onto them as she comes home. With the confidence she has developed in her power as a woman, she is able to use the shoes to make the choice to return home for the well-being of her family. Before her journey in Oz and her discovery of this power, her motivation is a vague notion that her family might worry; however, by the time she has made it to her last moments in Oz, she has realized that her decision will affect the lives of the people closest to her and decides to put the welfare of her family over her personal desires. She does not decide to come back to Kansas because she misses the domestic lifestyle or the societal expectations attached to it; instead, she returns because she recognizes that her power is needed within her family to maintain their livelihood. By bringing her newly empowered outlook on life back to Kansas, Dorothy will be able to redefine feminine authority, combining domesticity and power as a new, willful woman.

As a protagonist, Dorothy acts as a model of a developing feminist. She is influenced by other women as she goes on her journey, and when she finally recognizes the authority being given to her, she claims it and internalizes it in a way that transforms her. She learns that a woman can be authoritative and nurturing like the stork and small yet powerful like the mouse. These lessons help her to realize that she can be an empowered feminist who willfully takes ownership of authority while still returning to domestic life, proving that domestic life does not signify a failure as an empowered woman. Therefore, Dorothy's choice to go home to Kansas in no way demonstrates an inadequacy to live up to feminist ideas of empowerment. To misinterpret Dorothy's return is to reject that she has the will to act on her own desires, thus rejecting that women have the power to transform the places where they assert authority. Dorothy, the willful woman, chooses to return home, where she will be an empowered woman who empowers her community. Through Dorothy's adventure and self-development, she proves that a new definition of womanhood is sometimes just three heel-clicks away.

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