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Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

Lăcrămioara-Petronela OLARU
Universitatea „Al. I. Cuza", Iaşi

Résumé: Salué pour «avoir inventée un mythe, Pamela Lyndon Travers refusa humblement d'assumer les mérites de la « naissance» de Mary Poppins. Bien que d'accord avec la prémisse de C. S. Lewis déclarant qu'«il y a un seul créateur et nous mélangeons simplement les éléments qu'il nous donne», l'auteur née en Australie affirme que son protagoniste vient de venir à elle comme partie de la sagesse antique héritée des dieux qui coule dans le sang humain.
En divers articles réunis sous le titre «Ce que l'abeille sait. Réflexions sur mythe, symbole et histoire», Pamela invoque les concepts du «chaudron» celte, de la «rêverie» australienne ou des connaissances secrètes des druides comme source d'inspiration, en admettant avoir emprunté librement des histoires de la tradition universelle et réarrangé leurs événements pour correspondre à la « nécessité intérieure des choses.»
Selon son point de vue, le fait que les mêmes histoires surgissent ailleurs dans le monde témoigne du fait que le grain se trouve dans l'homme même, le navire à travers lequel le mythe se donne de la force. L'homme peut « seulement se connecter », mais ne jamais réellement créer ou inventer.
Mots-Clé: *le « chaudron » celte, le sang, emprunt, « seulement connecter, » shamanisme.*

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," "Spit spot!" and "A Spoon Full of Sugar Helps the Medicine Go Down" are some of the formulas which have made Disney's nanny, Mary Poppins, famous world-wide. However, about her original source little has been heard of until recently (1999), when Valerie Lawson published Pamela Lyndon Travers's biography, "Mary Poppins, She Wrote." In 2013, the Walt Disney Company released the film "Saving Mr. Banks," which brought the author into the spotlight and paid homage for her contribution to the literary world. But as the picture depicts mainly the story of her personal life, there are still just a handful of people acquainted to her works and interests.

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During her long and controversial life (1899-1996), Helen Lyndon Goff[1] was actress, poetess, essayist, journalist, war correspondent and writer. Australian-born, Lyndon came to England when she was twenty-four, in search for critical acclaim from the British audience. She met George William Russell who was to become her mentor and teach her about mythology, religious texts and fairy tales. Spending time in his company inevitably led to her joining the Theosophical Society[2] and attending their meetings in Dublin.

Through AE[3], Pamela encountered her illustrious paragon, William Butler Yeats, obtained her first paid job as a collaborator for his magazine, *The Irish Statesman*, and began writing more extensive novels like the eight *Mary Poppins* books (1934 – *Mary Poppins*, 1935 – *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, 1943 – *Mary Poppins Opens the Door*, 1952 – *Mary Poppins in the Park*, 1963 – *Mary Poppins from A to Z*, 1975 – *Mary Poppins in the Kitchen*, 1982 – *Mary Poppins in Cherry Tree Lane*, 1988 – *Mary Poppins and the House Next Door*) and *Friend Monkey* (1972).

Already familiar with the Irish lore due to her father who prided in his origins, raised by her mother in Christian spirit and imbued with the „grimms'[4] of Matilda, one of her servants, Pamela brooded[5] on her own philosophy of life that would be characterized by syncretism and would bear the imprint of theosophist influences. Visiting Moscow on her own during tumultuous times (1934), living within a Navajo reservation for two summers during the war, experiencing with oriental practices of meditation, studying the sacred texts lying at the foundation of the oldest religious practices, exploring myths and fairy tales, and debating her acquired knowledge with other literary figures, like Oliver St. John Gogarty or George Russell, eventually determined Travers „under-stand' or „stand-under' a concept which represents the basis of her work: the Celtic „Cauldron.'

Various articles from "What the Bee Knows" offer hints over her inspirational sources for the unusual Mary Poppins. Apparently, she is the result of an entire collection of real-life people Pamela had the chance of observing and studying: her great aunt, Helen, her servant, Matilda, her mother, Margaret, and herself, to which she added her inherited knowledge flowing in her bloodstream. While physically plain as a Dutch Doll[6], the super-nanny is endowed with an intricately woven personality meant to differentiate her from any other governess. Many have tried to establish her roots and connect her with ancient

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[1] Pamela's birth name: Helen after her great aunt on her mother's side (Scottish); Lyndon, an Irish name often used in her father's family - shortened to Lyndy or Ginty while she was a child. As an actress, she changed her name choosing Pamela because she liked how it sounded and using her father's name as her surname.

[2] Movement initiated by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, a Russian visionary crone, in 1875.

[3] George Russell's pseudonym - The Gnostics called the first created beings aeons; his pseudonym seems to be a kind of mathematical formula of the letters: A= Deity; AE= the first emanation from the Deity; O=static continuance for some time; N=change, that is the spirit returns to God. Pamela also pretended „Anon' to be her signature.

[4] Term used by Pamela to refer to the Grimms' fairy tales.

[5] As a child she actually used to pretend she was a hen and brooded until her mother forcefully brought her into the house for supper

[6] An actual object Pamela possessed and used as a model for sketching her protagonist. It was donated to the children's room of the New York Public Library in 1972.

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archetypes of goddesses, witches, shamans, priestesses or Christian symbols, but they were discouraged by the writer's refusal to explain anything, while rarely dismissing any assumptions at all[7]. During a conference, she was informed that a student had identified her fictional character as a Zen priestess. Asked to comment upon the subject, Pamela found the idea interesting and required to be sent a copy of the essay but she warned the respective person that she feels in no way obliged to answer the courtesy.

Thus we are confronted with a paradox: although the author claims not to have invented her character, but to have summoned it from her bloodstream where it was lingering waiting to be called upon, therefore suggesting that she is a relative of the ancient mythological heroines who are meant to transgress time and space in order to bring us the wisdom of the gods, she is, at the same time, telling us that Mary Poppins is "The Great Exception," "The Oddity," "The Misfit," "the One and Only," "An Absolute, Marvellous, Wonderful Wonder." Anyone tempted to see her as an archetype should read the recently published article "The Subversive Mary Poppins: An Alternative Image of the Witch in Children's Literature" which places Mary Poppins in exactly no category at all: she cannot be a typical witch because witches are malevolent and eat children, while our protagonist is a caretaker of children; she is no magician since magic is trying to control and dominate nature and people, Mary Poppins, on the contrary, gives freedom to children to experience on their own, brood and then draw their personal conclusions; she might be a shaman summoned by the Banks family but there is no one to heal, hence her presence would be redundant; she could not possibly be a fairy tale character as they are highly predictable and schemata-bound, which does not fit this nanny's main quality: the ability to astound everyone around. The answer is to be found deeply hidden in the writer's memories about her childhood in Australia. Remembering her discussions with her mother about the fairy tales they used to read together, she discloses her preference for the negative characters: "If I am true to my memory, the heroes and heroines have all one face, bland and featureless. It is the lineaments of the villains – dwarf, giant and stepmother, wicked fairy, dragon, witch – that leap to me now across the years. Each one is different, each is its own – pitted, grained and cicatriced, battered by passion and power." [Travers, 2010:231].

Pamela embraces the idea of the fallibility of man as a necessary condition for his existence on earth. There is no need for the human being to choose between good and bad as they are both part of whom he is. Thus, after analysing her favourite fairy tale, "The Sleeping Beauty," Travers concludes that the entire story revolves around the Wicked Fairy, an unlucky victim of chance – because the King had only twelve gold plates - she pitied and therefore loved. This character plays an instrumental role as the story needs her to make the things wrong so they might come right again. Without her, Beauty would neither have slept nor awakened. Similarly, Mary Poppins

[7] Except the ludicrous ones like that made by an interviewer who came to visit her at home and asked her if Mary Poppins is a copy of a real person she might have met at some point in her life, to which Pamela replied: "What? Someone who slides up bannisters? No, never. Did you?" [Travers, 2010:204]

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is not anywhere near perfection[8]. She is vain, often admiring her reflection in the mirrors or in the windows of the shops, dandy-like being quite preoccupied about her physical appearance, her clothes looking impeccable while accessorized with a parrot-headed umbrella and adorned with splendid details. Her temper is the ruling mood of the day and children gradually get used to guessing her disposition from studying her clothes or movements in the morning. Already familiar with the repercussions they have to endure if they upset or offend her in the least, they learn to respect her moroseness and not to ask too many questions because otherwise they risk missing a great adventure.

Mary Poppins, a crone[9] that shares some features with Lyndon's great aunt Helen, is expected to put everybody in its place with her standard British English since she is never in the mood of explaining anything. Using stereotypical formulas ("Care killed a cat," "Trouble trouble and it will trouble you!", "A watched pot never boils") [Travers, 2013:56, 85], answering snappishly or just vaguely («Mary Poppins gave a quick glance into the window beside her. She saw herself shining back at her, very smart, very interesting, her hat on straight, her coat nicely pressed and her new gloves just completing the whole effect. "You be quiet," she said to Jane in her snappiest voice."»; «"Which way are we going today?" asked Michael. "That remains to be seen!" she answered him priggishly. "I was only enquiring – "Michael argued. "Don't then!" she advised, with a warning sniff.») [Travers, 2013:34, 123], falsely denying her outspoken and impatient attitude («"Indeed? And when was I ever cross?" her voice inquired behind him. The remark quite shocked him. "Why, you're often cross, Mary Poppins!" he said. "At least fifty times a day!" "Never!" she said with an angry snap. "I have the patience of a Boa-constrictor! I merely Speak My Mind!"») [Travers, 2013:92], dressing, behaving and talking according to her moods («"Strike me pink!" said Mary Poppins. That was what she always said when she was pleased.») [Travers, 2013:28] or imposing herself through her body language ("Mary Poppins' back, erect and angry, was like a silent warning.") [Travers, 2013:57] this nanny manages to impose her will over the household bullying Mrs. Banks into meekly obeying her commands, cunningly manipulating the children into keeping the secrecy of their adventures by denying all their claims of participating in their nocturnal escapes and persuading Mr. Banks and the servants into thinking that nothing goes right when she is not around. In conclusion, it is through her flaws that she reinstates the primordial order. If she were to be perfect, she would be dull and uninteresting. As such, she is human, prone to mistakes, enabled to teach while being taught. Through love she is turned from an outsider into a threshold figure and later on accepted as a member of the family[10]. Thus the cycle of her

[8] Those who have not read the books and were acquainted with the character only after watching Walt Disney's adaptation from 1964 might be misled into thinking that Mary Poppins is "Practically Perfect in Every Way," a cheerful governess dedicated to singing and prancing around while the entire Banks family is waiting to be saved from chaos, the master of the household needs rescuing from himself and the children have to learn to have more fun, the cure for all human miseries being nothing more than "A Spoon Full of Sugar".

[9] Pamela believed that any woman passes through three stages: virgin, mother and crone.

[10] The nanny was considered to be an outsider, an employee confined to the nursery. Since she mediated between this room and the rest of the mansion, Georgia Grilli attributes her shamanistic qualities, categorizing her as a

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comings and goings is closed once and for all and there is no need for her to return anymore, since she has found the object of her quest: herself. More than that, the children are already initiated and her teachings are safely preserved inside their hearts like dear treasures so they will be perfectly fine on their own.

Love is also the theme of *Friend Monkey*, Pamela's most cherished work of all. The story has a friendly subservient monkey as protagonist and its plot is focused on an array of blunders committed by the poor animal out of too much labour to make itself pleasant and useful for the dear ones. Hence his flaw – clumsiness – comes from perfection – love. It seems that the author was bitterly disappointed by the cold shoulder offered by the British audience to her novel and laid the blame on their incapacity to sense the inexhaustible love flow pouring from the warm heart of her hero. She never expected the supercilious Mary Poppins, with her odd tempers and crushing dialogue, to become an icon, while her adorable monkey was simply thrown into oblivion. However, hope and escapism are two of the things which animated the souls of the British nation at a time when the Irish people were struggling to be recognized as a separate entity and war was knocking at the doors of a rapidly changing society, and our nanny was there to offer relief and alternatives, new perspectives[11].

After many incursions to America, Lyndon managed to make some friends there and to get introduced to literary circles which brought her closer to the fashionable tendencies of the time. Those works which received bad reviews in England were highly esteemed in America and the other way around, therefore Pamela exploited both markets to her advantage and earned more money due to this strategy. However, what really made her rich and famous was selling her super-nanny to Walt Disney. After sinuous debates and many unsuccessful attempts (over more than twenty years), Walt managed to convince the reticent Mrs. Travers that her Mary Poppins was on good hands and that he would take care not to transform her into something she is not (which is exactly what he has done). But he had his own convictions and stereotypical way of working. He knew exactly what the American public wanted and he procured it, bottled it, wrapped it nicely and then delivered. His movies were about cherishing family values above all, giving hope to the hopeless and the American dream of getting rich overnight. Plus, he was already experimenting with combining live actors with cartoons, animatronics and other

threshold figure. Mary Poppins becomes a member of the family when she learns to love her charges and to feel attached to them. If in the first book she leaves without saying good bye to the children and giving any notice in advance to the mistress, in the second one her departure becomes soapy and her sorrow is openly voiced. She even offers Jane and Michael a souvenir to remember her: a locket with their picture together. The third, and last, time she goes away she says farewell to everybody and shows regret at leaving for good. Gestures such as pausing on the threshold, looking back or smiling sadly at the children prove that she has finally reached her full potential, she has re-discovered herself and now she may end her initiatic journey (Pamela's theory about the quest of the fairy tale protagonist: every man is the hero of his own story and is in search of something old and lost a long time ago, a treasure, namely his own self).

[11] Reference to the chapter "Topsy Turvy" from "Mary Comes Back." The children and Mary Poppins go to visit her cousin, Mr. Turvy, in order to ask him to mend a Doulton bowl Jane has broken in a fit of rage. While at his house, they all turn upside down and have the possibility of seeing the town reverted while Miss Tartlet, the tenant of the house, remarks: "I have seen the world upside down today and I have got a New Point of view." [Travers, 2013:120]

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pioneering techniques which were meant not only as secret weapons against the rivals but also to satisfy his childhood dreams and his ego. Dealing with a difficult and capricious writer as co-worker was a challenge Walt could not imagine not accepting. Therefore, Pamela came to the studio, met the crew and started imposing her will, because she got script approval rights, on the Sherman brothers who were in charge with composing the musical score. Because no one could openly refuse her and she was not reasonable when arguing about her beloved Mary Poppins, Disney decided adopting the strategy of silence. Thus, although he agreed not to employ any American actors, not to use cartoons and to modify some scenes concerning Mr. Banks (like the one presenting the character as a heartless monster who tears his children's letter up and then throws it into the fireplace), he never did as he promised. And because he felt guilty about it, he purposefully pretended to have forgotten to send Pamela an invitation to the premiere of the film. But he could not have done otherwise since all his fairy tale adaptations had to fit the Disney patterns: technique was taking precedence over the story, viewers were seduced by the carefully arranged images so they might not think on their own preferring instead to let themselves carried away and controlled by the puppeteer, while characters were not subjected to any kind of evolution because they were stereotypes placed to serve certain credos. [see Zipes, 2006:107]

That is how „Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,' a word the Sherman brothers claimed to know since they were children, came into being. The catchy song, along with others like "Chim Chim Cher-ee," "A Spoonful of Sugar," "Jolly Holiday" or "Let's Go Fly a Kite," had immediate impact on the public who acclaimed the movie as one of the best of its time. It is interesting, however, to notice that the word, which nowadays came to mean "extraordinarily good, wonderful" [Oxford Dictionary], is used in the picture with another connotation: "something you say when you have nothing to say," that is when you are at loss of words. The fictional Mary Poppins is so intimidating for the children, Mr. Banks, Mrs. Banks and even „The Holy Terror'[12], that they are often put in difficulty when they have to find their words in her presence. In the film, Mary Poppins is such a dear, fun, happy person that she takes your breath away with her beautiful singing and charm. Though put in opposition, both personalities require the same word to describe them: „supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,' so Robert and Richard Sherman could not have ever found a better word to encapsulate the complexity of Pamela's character, neither to illustrate the feeling the viewer gets while admiring the merrily prancing scenes in which the nanny raises her skirts in honour of the American spirit. When confronted with the "Great Exception," all that is left to say is: „supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.'

[12] Mrs. Andrew, Mr. Banks's former nanny.

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