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The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Bedtime Stories

Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson

By July 1994, Politically Correct Bedtime Stories had appeared for the third time on the New York Times bestseller list with sales exceeding 100,000 copies. One year later, there were almost 1.5 million copies of Politically Correct Bedtime Stories in print as it continued to excite public commentary. This popular book is an ideal case study for exploring the benefits and limits of satiric humor, the book’s primary rhetorical strategy and the focus of this essay. We argue that because of its polyvalent nature, the use of ironic satire as a rhetorical strategy to debunk a position is unpredictable. In fact, as this essay demonstrates, some forms of humor may facilitate audience acceptance of the very ideas the satirist intends to disparage. In this case, Garner’s use of satiric humor may have facilitated acceptance of moderate forms of political correctness. Key words: political correctness, satire, irony, humor, James Finn Garner

Once upon a time, in the olden days, heavy-set middle-aged men would congregate in their elitist clubs, sit in over-stuffed leather chairs, smoke air-choking cigars, and pitch story ideas and plots to each other. Problem was, these stories, many of which found their way into the general social consciousness, reflected the way in which these men lived and saw their world: that is, the stories were sexist, discriminatory, unfair, culturally biased, and in general, demeaning to witches, animals, goblins, and fairies everywhere.¹

Finally, after centuries of these abusive tales [bedtime stories], which have been handed down—unknowingly—from one male-biased generation to the next, James Finn Garner has taken it upon himself ... to enlighten and liberate these classic bedtime stories and retell them in a way that is much more in keeping with the society in which we live today (inside cover).

Aftet 27 rejections and two years of shopping for a publisher, comedian James Finn Garner finally realized his goal of rewriting traditional fairy tales when Rick Wolff, an editor at Macmillan, offered to buy Garner’s Politically Correct Bedtime Stories. “In a marketplace where humor books are a dime a dozen,” Wolff was skeptical of how the American public and critics would respond to Garner’s creative spin on familiar children’s fairy tales.² By July 10, 1994, Politically Correct Bedtime Stories had surpassed all expectations, appearing for the third time on the New York Times bestseller list with sales exceeding 100,000.³ One year later, there were almost 1.5 million copies of Politically Correct Bedtime Stories in print as it continued to excite public commentary. The book’s overwhelming popularity demanded a sequel, and Garner complied with Politically Correct Holiday Stories for an Enlightened Yuletide Season, then with Once Upon a More Enlightened Time: More Politically Correct Bedtime Stories, which arrived in August 1995, “backed by a 600,000-copy first printing, an extensive publicity campaign, a hefty advertising budget, and numerous TV appearances by Garner.”⁴

Reviewers’ reactions to the book suggest an interesting rhetorical point. All agreed on the appeal of the humor, but their analyses of the import of the satire differed. Some reviewers, sympathetic to the issues underlying the push towards less gendered language, hailed the book as “a delightful and lucrative exercise in absurdist literature” and “a fresh breath of air and a well-deserved slap in the face for Hans Christian Andersen and the brothers Grimm.”⁵ Labeling it “updated to account for modern political sensibilities,” other reviewers insisted that the “results [were] extremely funny” and that
the “revisionist folktales reflect[ed] wit and an engaging knack for irony.” On the other hand, some praised Garner for producing “good political satire” and for “mak[ing] fun of current sensibilities by rewriting old fairy tales using seriously nonoffensive language.” In short, the book’s humor enabled diverse readings of its “meaning.”

For rhetorical scholars, *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* merits study for several reasons. First, its widespread and rapid success suggests that it struck a chord in the national consciousness. As we have seen, both opponents and supporters of political correctness responded positively to the work. Second, the public response is particularly notable because the book addresses political correctness, a topic that continues to be controversial. With much publicity, political correctness evolved from an academic debate into a heated national dispute. In the process, political correctness became anathema to many conservatives who saw some proposals as eroding both common sense and social norms. In many circles, seemingly innocent comments became charged with cultural significance. Proponents and opponents squared off in heated confrontations over the “real” importance of formerly taken-for-granted utterances. A widely popular work that emerges in the midst of such a controversy, especially one that elicits positive comments from all sides, is worthy of scrutiny. Third, and perhaps most important, the controversy that produced this book is an unusually significant one. At its core, the conflict over political correctness is a struggle for control over words and symbols. As we discuss below, the very term “political correctness” is fraught with tensions and ambiguities. Supporters and opponents disagree vehemently not only about the policies subsumed under the label of political correctness but also about the motivations and import of each side in the controversy. If language is, as Kenneth Burke and many others have suggested, a key to our framing, and consequently, our understanding of the world, the political correctness debate reflects a response to a significant threat to established patterns of power and control. In other words, the political correctness debate arouses strong passions precisely because it calls into question linguistic habits and conceptual frames.

Despite the book’s popularity, extensive press coverage, and controversial subject matter, rhetorical critics have not examined *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* nor considered its rhetorical strategies. In fact, critics have had little interest in humor as a rhetorical strategy. Building on an interest in Kenneth Burke, some communication scholars have begun to investigate the comic frame, particularly in political or social movement contexts. Cheree Carlson’s work, for example, explores various phases or facets of the comic; however, the comic frame does not necessarily entail the use of humor as a strategy. In a recent theoretical essay, “Humor as a Double-Edged Sword: Four Functions of Humor in Communication,” John Meyer outlines a theoretical perspective on the ways that humor functions rhetorically. Building on Meyer’s framework, we offer a detailed analysis of how humor functions rhetorically in an extended work.

*Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* is an excellent case study for a consideration of humor as a rhetorical strategy in that its primary thrust is ironic satire; this essay explores the rhetorical function of humor in the book. In brief, we argue that because of its polyvalent nature, the use of ironic satire as a rhetorical strategy to debunk a position is unpredictable. As this essay demonstrates, some forms of humor (notably satire) may debunk the ideas the satirist seeks to disparage while also facilitating audience acceptance of more moderate versions of those ideas. In this case, Garner’s use of satiric humor may have encouraged the acceptance of moderate forms of political correctness.
The balance of this essay develops as follows: first, a brief background on the controversy around political correctness; second, a theoretical sketch for understanding humor, especially irony and satire, as a rhetorical form; third, analysis of the ironic humor in *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, particularly the descriptions, characterizations, and plot reversals that create the humor in the work. Finally, we consider the rhetorical implications of the book’s use of irony and its ability to constitute interpretive communities with quite disparate attitudes towards its substance.

It’s All in the Timing: *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* Emerges Amid a Lively Debate

The origin of the term “political correctness” is unclear. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first use with its current flavor was in a *Washington Post* book review in September 1979. What is clear is that the term evokes strong emotions and wide disparities in views about what it means. For its proponents, political correctness refers specifically to the complex of behaviors and practices designed to purge the classroom and curricula of discriminatory biases based on religion, sex, race, class, culture, and other social factors. In other words, for them, political correctness denotes theories and practices designed to end discrimination and other injustices with regard to curricular requirements, affirmative action in hiring, and campus language and codes of conduct. On occasion, proponents use the term tongue-in-cheek as gentle self-mockery.

For others, political correctness has had far more significant and ominous meanings. For example, as late as 1998 at the 13th annual Accuracy in Academia Conference, Bill Lind, Director of the Center for Cultural Conservatism of the Free Congress Foundation, contended that political correctness was “deadly serious. It is the great disease of our century, the disease that has left tens of millions of people dead in Europe, in Russia, in China, indeed around the world. It is the disease of ideology. PC is not funny. PC is deadly serious.” Lind sees political correctness as a “totalitarian ideology”—cultural Marxism. For conservatives, especially extreme conservatives, political correctness has become a symbol of the excesses of multiculturalism run amok. In some senses, the term has evolved into shorthand for the conservative perception of a broad liberal agenda, all elements of which undermine established social norms and cultural values.

Thus, political correctness continues to be a contested term. Despite countless discussions and debates about what it is or is not, there is no agreement about what the term denotes. Both proponents and opponents have used the term rhetorically to shape perceptions of issues and proposals. As Edward Schiappa observes, struggles over definitions are struggles over how we perceive the world:

Definitions are rhetorical in the sense that they function as strategies of social influence and control. The special form of social control that definitions can induce can be described as “denotative conformity”... definitions are introduced and contested when a rhetor wants to alter an audience’s linguistic behavior in a particular fashion. A successful new definition changes not only recognizable patterns of behavior, but also our understanding of the world.

The particular stream of controversy over the meaning and implications of political correctness that produced *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* emerged as a mediated national debate in the late 1980s when Stanford University educators discussed substituting multiculturalism for the required traditional study of western civilization. The swift
and severe backlash to this and similar proposals reflected the contested meanings of the
term. Opponents such as Seymour Lipset, contributor to *The Imperiled Academy*, attacked
"the efforts by campus advocates of left-liberal politics to control the content of speech,
courses, and appointments, and to impose their views with respect to multiculturalism,
minority rights, and feminism," claiming that such efforts corrupted higher learning.\(^{19}\)
Several conservatives penned bestsellers, such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American
Mind*, Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, and
Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, all of which voiced anti-politically correct sentiments
with predictions that the liberal agenda would bring about the downfall of western
culture. Clearly, for the political right, political correctness was pejorative and connoted
broad-based efforts by liberals to recast many aspects of contemporary U.S. culture,
especially in and through education.

As the political correctness war raged furiously in academia, a general, public debate
ensued. Nationally televised and published materials surrounding contemporary politi-
cal events, such as the 1992 Year of the Woman and the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas
hearings, catalyzed gender and minority issues from the academic realm into Ameri-
cans' homes.\(^{20}\) Such publicity raised U.S. consciousness of gender and minority
imbalance in the national government, and a variety of related issues such as sexual
harassment, gender equality, affirmative action, and reproductive rights. So-called
politically correct language flourished in this environment as a means of dealing with
multicultural, diversity, and gender issues and concerns. Television news programs
such as the MacNeil/Lehrer *NewsHour* and popular newspapers and magazines such as
News & World Report*, and *Time*\(^{21}\) publicized various aspects of the highly polarized
political correctness debate throughout the U.S. Communication scholars Charles
Whitney and Ellen Wartella note that references to political correctness in the
mainstream press increased from a mere 101 in 1988 to 3,877 in 1991.\(^{22}\) The mediated
debate contributed to the ambiguity of the term, the meaning of which rapidly
expanded to include healthy eating, environmental protection, animal rights, and
ageism. In other words, by the 1990s political correctness was associated, often
pejoratively, with a myriad of social changes and issues, all of which were sites of
controversy.

In a multicultural society in conflict over the role of language in assuaging problems
of difference, *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* emerged at an opportune moment with witty
references to a multiplicity of politically correct topics including healthy foods, feminism,
ageism, reproductive rights, inclusive language, multiculturalism, animal rights, and
was "appalled to learn that some children's classics were actually being revised to
remove allegedly offensive material and that kindergarten teachers were being advised
to avoid certain stories."\(^{23}\) Garner adds that his new book was "mimicking that
overreaction ... There's magic to storytelling, and fear and wonder, and when you tie
obvious little agendas to it, kids see that ... I don't think a kid was ever made sexist
because he or she read *Snow White*. I think they were made sexist because of how they
were raised and what they see in society around them. They didn't get it from silly little
stories—they got it from Barbie."\(^{24}\) A vocal opponent of political correctness, Garner
claims that when people espouse it they are "debasin the idea of sexual or racial
equality and wasting credibility trying to get people to eliminate certain ways of saying
things. You're not converting them, you're annoying them."\(^{25}\) Garner hopes that people
who read his book will "realize that political correctness, when taken to an extreme, doesn't help understanding. It clouds it." Certainly, discussion of such a highly polarized and nationally mediated issue in a fairy tale format easily recognized and understood by the general public guaranteed Garner immediate access to a large and diverse popular culture audience. The ambiguities in the meanings of political correctness, and the struggles over its definition, supplied Garner with an ideal backdrop for his satiric rewriting of children's stories.

Irony and Satire as Rhetorical Strategies

Central to the popularity of Garner's book is his use of humor, especially satire and irony, as a dominant rhetorical strategy. Since classical times, theorists have been interested in irony as a literary and rhetorical device, probably because it appears so regularly in satires, ranging from Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" to Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* to cartoons in the *New Yorker*. Satire is a primary technique for deflating egos and providing social criticism; thus, ironic satires sometimes emerge, as did Swift's "Modest Proposal" and Garner's *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, in the midst of social controversies. Although irony is a useful tool for any satirist, the very nature of ironic discourse poses distinctive challenges for an author. Understanding irony's rhetorical function requires a brief overview of some theoretical work on humor, satire, and irony.

Although many scholars have explored the nature, scope, and power of humor in its various forms, Kenneth Burke's work is a good starting point for considering the rhetorical dimensions of humor. In *Attitudes Toward History*, Burke addresses humor, satire, and irony, captured in the literary forms of comedy, elegy, tragedy, and burlesque, as human strategies for forming communities and responding to social situations. According to Burke, these literary categories imply attitudes and courses of action; those attitudes "prepare us for some functions and against others, for or against the persons representing these functions. The names go further: they suggest how you shall be for or against. Call a man a villain, and you have the choice of either attacking or cringing. Call him mistaken, and you invite yourself to attempt setting him right." Together, related attitudes form frames, or systems of meanings by which people order reality and assess their role within the social, political, and material world.

Of all the literary forms, Burke preferred the comic because it produces "maximum consciousness," enabling people to transcend their individual weaknesses and foibles by noticing problems and errors in a "charitable" manner. According to Burke, the comic frame emphasizes that which is foolish or stupid by:

- picturing people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that all people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle ... The audience, from its vantage point, sees the operation of errors that the characters of the play cannot see; thus seeing from two angles at once, it is chastened by dramatic irony; it is admonished to remember that when intelligence means *wisdom* (in contrast to the modern tendency to look upon intelligence as merely a *coefficient of power* for heightening our ability to get things, be they good things or bad), it requires fear, resignation, the sense of limits, as an important ingredient ... Comedy is essentially *humane*, leading in periods of comparative stability to the comedy of manners, the dramatization of quirks and foibles.

Importantly, Burke draws a clear distinction between comedy and humor as literary
forms. Burke observes that, unlike comedy, in which the heroine’s character is magnified to compete with an equally dominant situation, humor heightens the heroine’s role in comparison with a diminished situation. Burke explains that humor “takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation. It converts downwards … [and] tends to gauge the situation falsely.” Thus, humor, in contrast to comedy, tends towards rejection rather than acceptance of that which is ridiculed. In comedy, the mistaken one can be easily reincorporated into society because she or he is merely mistaken. In humor the diminution of the other creates distance and differentiation—division rather than identification.

In his analysis of the communicative dimensions of humor, John Meyer outlines a theory of how humor functions in society. After reviewing theories of humor, Meyer contends that humor has four basic rhetorical functions—identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation—two of which unite and two of which separate one set of communicators from another. Importantly, as Meyer notes, depending on their perspectives audiences may ascribe any one of the four functions to a single instance of humor. He explains that identification and clarification work, respectively, to create bonds between the rhetor and the audience and to capture the essence of a position in a pithy, humorous remark that makes clear the rhetor’s attitudes. In both approaches, the bond between rhetor and audience is enhanced. Enforcement uses humor to reassert social norms while maintaining some identification with a specific audience. Of course, the enforcement of social norms also marginalizes and holds up for ridicule those who do not follow them. Finally, differentiation, as the name suggests, creates contrasts and highlights differences, emphasizing the factors that divide groups or individuals. What distinguishes enforcement and differentiation is that they split the social fabric by creating in and out groups. As Meyer notes, “Humor is both a ‘lubricant’ and an ‘abrasive’ in social situations … It can smooth the way and integrate a rhetor into a greater level of credibility within a group, but it can also ruffle feathers and cause social friction and conflict.”

In his definition of satire, J.A. Cuddon highlights how acute differentiating and enforcement can become. “The satirist is thus a kind of self-appointed guardian of standards, ideals and truth; of moral as well as aesthetic values. He is a man (women satirists are very rare) who takes it upon himself to correct, censure and ridicule the follies and vices of society and thus to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm.” Kathleen Morner and Ralph Rausch concur. According to their analysis, satire “blends ironic humor and wit with criticism for the purpose of ridiculing folly, vice, stupidity—the whole range of human foibles and frailties—in individuals and institutions. Satire … seeks to correct, improve, or reform through ridicule.” As they note, the “chief device” of satire is irony.

Interestingly, both irony and satire require intense audience engagement. As Wayne Booth argues in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, irony sustains its rhetorical force by requiring that the audience engage the text on an intense intellectual and emotional level to understand the humor. Booth comments on the effect of such audience engagement, stating, “The essential structure of this irony is not designed to ‘deceive some readers and allow others to see the secret message’ but to deceive *all* readers for a time and then require *all* readers to recognize and cope with their deception.” Thus, for ironic discourse to function ironically the audience must join the author in creating its meaning.

To explain the audience’s participation in irony, Booth lays out the necessary steps.
First, "the reader is required to reject the literal meaning … If he is reading properly, he is unable to escape recognizing either some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else he knows." This step "is not peculiar to irony, only essential to it."\(^{39}\) Next, the reader or hearer must try out alternative explanations or interpretations, all of which will be to some extent incongruous with what the literal statement seems to mean. Third, and critically, the hearer or reader must decide about the author's knowledge or beliefs. "Note, that the first two steps by themselves cannot tell us that a statement is ironic. No matter how firmly I am convinced that a statement is absurd or illogical or just plain false, I must somehow determine whether what I reject is also rejected by the author, and whether he has reason to expect my concurrence."\(^{40}\) Only then can the reader or hearer choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings from the alternatives tried in step two with which s/he can be comfortable. Booth concludes: "Once I begin to think about this four-step act of reconstruction, I see that it completes a more astonishing communal achievement than most accounts have recognized. Its complexities are, after all, shared: the whole thing cannot work at all unless both parties to the exchange have confidence that they are moving together in identical patterns."\(^{41}\)

Two points about Booth's analysis of irony are significant for this project. First, his model forces the author to share the responsibility for successfully creating irony with the reader or hearer. If a hearer or reader does not reject the literal meaning of a piece of discourse (step one), s/he may simply not see the material as ironic. Second, implicit in Booth's model is another response to irony. In addition to understanding the irony fully (the completion of all steps of the process) or simply not getting it at all (missing step one), the audience can laugh at the humorous elements in the ironic discourse but reject the disparagement that is its goal. As our analysis will reveal, this possibility creates an inescapable challenge when using irony as a persuasive strategy.

Irony in the service of satire is especially problematic. In Satire: Spirit and Art, George A. Test sets forth the obstacles that may confront the satirist in controlling the meaning of his/her text:

For satire there are immediate problems, namely the failure of some to understand or correctly interpret the work. While such problems exist for any piece of art, because of the special nature of satire and its relationship to the world outside, the possibility of a breakdown in communication between the satirist and the audience are greater than with most forms of art … Satire in effect asks—demands—that its audience engage in a dialogue of a special kind. In addition to making associations, the audience is expected to assimilate the special mixture of aggression, play, laughter and judgment that is set before it. Each of these alone can create difficulties. Aggression may cause resentment or other unfavorable reactions. Differences of opinion concerning the judgments are potential sources of contention. The playfulness of satire, especially when yoked to serious questions, may disconcert some … By its nature satire usually causes trouble, not merely because it is an attack and a judgment, but also because satire, at its most complex, demands its audience be sophisticated, sensitive, and sympathetic: sophisticated about the audience context in which the satire transpires, sensitive to the means at work, and sympathetic in sharing the aggression and judgment.\(^{42}\)

One risk for the satirist, then, is that a reader may find the satire amusing, especially when it involves *reductio ad absurdum*, without sharing the author's attitudes or viewpoints. Specifically, satiric humor requires the audience to see the discourse in terms of some external context. As Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe argue, satire depends on historical specificity for its meaning: "Satire, more than other genres, emphasizes—
indeed, is defined by its intention (attack), an intention that again refers the reader to matter outside the text.\textsuperscript{43} One's view of the external circumstances to which satire refers is integral to how one understands the satire. Thus, with a highly charged topic such as political correctness, readers on both sides of the controversy, together with those who have no strong opinion, may read the satire with its intended irony, laugh at the comic elements, and leave the tales with their original views intact.

Despite its risks and complications, satire is nonetheless an important tool for questioning either established ideas or new proposals because it can create new insights. Successful satire functions in part by creating, as Kenneth Burke phrases it, “perspective by incongruity.” By offering a new way of looking at something, this strategy calls into question one’s taken-for-granted. One begins to recognize that one’s way of seeing is, inevitably, “a way of not seeing.”\textsuperscript{44} This unsettling of an established perspective helps one to recognize “that every insight contains its own special kind of blindness.”\textsuperscript{45} Karlyn Kohrs Campbell offers an excellent example of this process in her discussion of Gloria Steinem’s treatment of menstruation. There, Campbell sketches the symbolic reversal that Steinem produces by imagining how menstruation would be viewed if men could menstruate and women could not. Steinem’s rhetorical creativity with parody and irony helps “raise consciousness by calling received wisdom into question.”\textsuperscript{46}

When Garner turns to satire in \textit{Politically Correct Bedtime Stories}, he is seeking to use the resources of humor, specifically satire, to hold up what he sees as a troubling new trend to ridicule and to reconsideration. As we will see in the following discussion, his re-treatment of classic bedtime stories attempts to create a new perspective through incongruity.

\textbf{Bedtime Stories for a New Age}

Garner did not explain why he chose the particular stories in his first collection, but the titles are all familiar to most readers: “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “Cinderella,” and “Snow White” are all included. Only one title—“The Three Codependent Goats Gruff”—suggests his satiric bent, but the book’s physical appearance offers the first clues to its ironic humor. With large print, a thin compact size, and black and white pictures surrounding the first letter of the first word in each story, the book appears non-confrontational, innocuous, and lighthearted—just another collection of fairy tales. A closer examination reveals that the shaded pictures that surround the first letter of each story are satiric. For example, the first letter beginning the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” portrays a wolf and cloaked child holding hands, and the “O” (for “Once there were three little pigs”) in “The Three Little Pigs” depicts the pigs as revolutionaries with rifles. Three women prancing gaily in their undergarments, while a middle-aged man sheepishly peers out from his hiding place, appear around the “T” of “There once lived,” at the beginning of “Cinderella.” These sketches mirror the book’s cover, which depicts fairy tale characters in preposterous attire toasting one another with Perrier. For instance, the seven dwarves are vertically challenged gang members, complete with dark shades and embossed leather jackets, while Foxy Loxy, with one arm around his buddy and client, a bandaged Chicken Little, sports a lawyer suit, tie, and silver-rimmed glasses. These visual cues reflect the ironic thrust of the entire book; through ironic reversals in characterizations and plots, Garner attempts to ridicule political correctness in all its alleged manifestations.
Transformed Characters: Enlightened Heroines, New Villains

The narratives themselves quickly establish Garner’s satiric bent. For example, although the initial phrases of “Goldilocks” resemble the traditional tale, the reader soon realizes that something is afoot:

Through the thicket, across the river, and deep, deep in the woods, lived a family of bears—a Papa Bear, a Mama Bear, and a Baby Bear—and they all lived together anthropomorphically in a little cottage as a nuclear family. They were very sorry about this, of course, since the nuclear family has traditionally served to enslave womyn, instill a self-righteous moralism in its members, and imprint rigid notions of heterosexualist roles onto the next generation. Nevertheless, they tried to be happy and took steps to avoid these pitfalls, such as naming their offspring the non-gender-specific “Baby” (39).

On the simplest level, the language embodies Garner’s ironic thrust; “anthropomorphically” and “nuclear family” break the traditional formula for fairy tales and alert the reader to the need for a reading beyond the familiar. “Self-righteous moralism” and “rigid notions of heterosexualist roles,” together with the alternative spelling of “womyn,” suggest the emerging irony. The characterization of Goldilocks herself sharpens the attack on political correctness. In the original story, Goldilocks is a naïve, if insensitive, young woman who ventures into the bear’s lair with no sense of the inappropriateness of her behavior. She is, to borrow Burke’s language, simply “mistaken.” Garner’s re-characterization removes any hint of innocence, replacing it with calculation and intended intrusion:

[A] melanin-impoverished young wommon emerged from the bushes and crept up to the cottage… She was, you see, a biologist … At one time she had been a professor, but her aggressive, masculine approach to science—ripping off the thin veil of Nature, exposing its secrets, penetrating its essence, using it for her own selfish needs, and bragging about such violations in the letters columns of various magazines—had led to her dismissal (40).

The descriptions of her attitude (“aggressive,” “masculine”), of her actions (“ripping,” bragging”) and of the “violations” that ensue are in tension with what she is about: research and publication, common activities for the academic world. Some readers sharing Garner’s distaste for political correctness quickly see the characterization as ironic. But other readers may reject the irony and see the passage as an amusing comment about the insensitivities of some scientific practice and/or about the challenges women face in traditionally masculine fields. Still, all readers will perceive this characterization of Goldilocks to be in sharp contrast to the young woman in traditional tellings.

Garner caricatures political correctness in his depictions of characters in other familiar stories. In “Little Red Riding Hood,” Garner’s irony targets feminism, ageism, and even contemporary diet:

One day, her mother asked her to take a basket of fresh fruit and mineral water to her grandmother’s house—not because this was womyn’s work, mind you, but because the deed was generous and helped engender a feeling of community. Furthermore, her grandmother was not sick, but rather was in full physical and mental health and was fully capable of taking care of herself as a mature adult (1).

As described, the motivations behind Little Red Riding Hood’s action and her choice of items to convey to grandmother begin to reverse our expectations for the story. The
description of Little Red Riding Hood as “confident enough in her own budding sexuality that such obvious Freudian imagery [fear of entering the dark forest] did not intimidate her” prepares us for her retort to the wolf’s concern for her safety in the forest: “I find your sexist remark offensive in the extreme, but I will ignore it because of your traditional status as an outcast from society, the stress of which has caused you to develop your own, entirely valid, worldview” (2). With this new image of Little Red Riding Hood, the reader confronts the reversals in the depiction of the wolf with equanimity:

Because his status outside society had freed him from slavish adherence to linear, western-style thought, the wolf knew a quicker route to Grandma’s house. He burst into the house and ate Grandma, an entirely valid course of action for a carnivore such as himself. Then, unhampered by rigid, traditionalist notions of what was masculine or feminine, he put on Grandma’s nightclothes and crawled into bed (2–3).

With a liberated, sympathetic wolf and a fully aware Little Red Riding Hood, the reader is not surprised that the woodchopper becomes the villain:

When [the log-fuel technician] burst into the cottage, he saw the melee and tried to intervene. But as he raised his ax, Red Riding Hood and the wolf both stopped. “And just what do you think you’re doing?” asked Red Riding Hood … “Bursting in here like a Neanderthal, trusting your weapon to do your thinking for you!” she [Red Riding Hood] exclaimed. “Sexist! Speciesist! How dare you assume that womyn and wolves can’t solve their own problems without a man’s help” (4).

The calculus involved in these transformations of characters remains consistent throughout the new fairy tales. The three little pigs emerge not as fragile victims, but as militant resisters to imperialistic aggression. The three billy goats gruff move from sly, shrewd manipulators to a family of codependents confronting a troll who, in the face of the largest goat, pleads for his life by saying: “Oh, please, please forgive me! I was using you and your goat siblings for my own selfish ends” (20). The self-named “Seven Towering Giants” inform Snow White that they tower in spirit and thus are giants among men. As a sideline, they “conduct retreats for men who need to get in touch with their primitive masculine identities” (48). The fairy godmother in “Cinderella” is an “individual deity proxy” who tries to dissuade Cinderella from attending the ball:

“So, you want to go to the ball, eh? And bind yourself into the male concept of beauty? Squeeze into some tight-fitting dress that will cut off your circulation? Jam you feet into high-heeled shoes that will ruin your bone structure? Paint your face with chemicals and make-up that have been tested on nonhuman animals?” “Oh yes, definitely,” she [Cinderella] said in an instant (32–33).

As Cinderella’s response suggests, traditional heroes and heroines almost always emerge as caricatures of their traditional selves. Cinderella’s prince is “celebrating his exploitation of the dispossessed and marginalized peasantry by throwing a fancy dress ball” (31). Discussing jousting and bear-baiting with his cronies before Cinderella arrives, his reaction to her is dramatic: “‘Here,’ he thought, ‘is a wommon that I could make my princess and impregnate with the progeny of our perfect genes, and thus make myself the envy of every other prince for miles around. And she’s blond, too’ ” (34). His ogling of Cinderella, shared with “every other male in the ballroom who was younger than 70 and not serving drinks,” may be because Cinderella “captured perfectly their
Barbie-doll ideas of feminine desirability” (34, 33). For her part, Cinderella is oblivious to her carriage drawn by a team of horse-slaves, her clinging dress made of “silk stolen from unsuspecting silk-worms,” and of her hair “festooned with pearls plundered from hard-working, defenseless oysters” (33). To secure access to her, the prince kneels his best friend, a large “cerebrally constrained” duke, in the groin just as he is being seized by other sex-crazed males, who collapse “into a pile of human animals” (35). The “womyn,” appalled by this “vicious display of testosterone,” attempt to separate the men before attacking Cinderella, the cause of the melee, in a display of “very unsisterly hostility” (35).

Within Garner’s new stories, then, traditional characters transmogrify into caricatures of themselves. Men are almost always either tools of the patriarchy or fools. Women begin either as self-aware individuals or, as a consequence of their experiences with men, move to become liberated “womyn.” Although these transformations help to establish Garner’s ironic intentions, the shifts in plots supply new endings for the familiar stories and new lessons for the reader.

The Plot Thickens: Strange Reversals and New Morals

Part of the appeal of fairy tales to generations of children and their parents has been the plots, which unfold predictably with bad people being punished and good ones living happily ever after. Of course, in Garner’s re-tellings, plots careen unpredictably, and the endings frequently assert a quite different moral. If, as Burke notes, form is the arousing and fulfilling of desire, then these revised stories upset our expectations and, through these upheavals, reveal an alternative perspective that is not altogether attractive. A few examples may help to illustrate Garner’s virtuosity with ironic humor.

In some cases, the plot reversals are brief but nonetheless dramatic. For example, in “The Frog Prince,” when the frog confesses he is a real estate developer turned into a frog by a sorcerer after a property-line dispute, the princess listens to his plan for exploiting the environment for a few moments before shoving the golden ball back into his mouth, pushing him underwater, and holding him there until he stops thrashing. The story concludes: “And while someone might have noticed that the frog was gone, no one ever missed the real estate developer” (66). Because the princess had tired of “beating her head against the male power structure in the castle,” her lack of support for the real estate developer is not surprising. Her treatment of the developer is, in part, an answer to her questions about “the role of the eco-feminist warrior in her era” (63).

In other stories, the alterations to the plot are more numerous, and the reversals produce significantly different morals for the reader. “Rapunzel” is illustrative. The initial scenes follow the traditional tale except for Garner’s typical twists: the witch is “kindness-impaired”; Rapunzel’s father “liberates” some lettuce from the witch’s “meticulously kept garden, a nauseating attempt to impose human notions of order onto Nature” (24, 23). With the arrival of the prince and the unexpected return of the witch via an extra set of braids she has prepared for an emergency, the story veers in new directions. When the witch states her claim to Rapunzel’s company on the basis of being the only one who truly loves her, the prince retorts: “We can talk about your codependency problems later … But first let me hear … Rapunzel, is it? … let me hear Rapunzel sing” (28–29). His reply to the witch’s threat of throwing him out of the tower onto thorn bushes begins upsetting the reader’s expectations:

“You may want to reconsider that,” said the prince. “I have some friends in the recording
industry, you see, who would be very interested in ... Rapunzel, wasn't it? ... I want you to continue to train her, to nurture her ... as her manager," said the prince. "Then, when the time is right, say in a week or two, you can unleash her talent on the world and we can all rake in the cash." The witch paused for a second to think about this, and her demeanor visibly softened. She and the prince began to discuss record contracts and video deals, as well as possible marketing ideas, including life-like Rapunzel™ dolls with their very own miniature stereo Tune-Towers™ (29).

Rapunzel listens, increasingly disgusted. Knowing that her hair has been exploited for years for the "transportational needs of others," she resists the exploitation of her voice as well. She realizes "with a sigh ... 'So, rapaciousness does not depend solely on gender' " (29). She climbs down the emergency set of hair, which she promptly removes, leaving the witch and the prince arguing "about royalties and percentages in their phallus-shaped tower." Moving into a building with real stairs, she establishes the "non-profit Foundation for the Free Proliferation of Music and cuts off her hair for a fund-raising auction" (30). She continues to sing, but only for free, because she refuses "to exploit for money other people's desire to hear her sing" (30).

As noted above, the altered characterizations are a key element in this story: the prince, far from simply being transported by Rapunzel's beauty, becomes more interested in making money from her talent. Significantly, he and the witch quickly find common ground in the commercialization of Rapunzel's talent. For her part, observing their interactions transforms Rapunzel. She is initially attracted to the prince despite his strong, musky odor and hairy face, a combination she finds "somewhat attractive" for reasons she does not fully understand, but his desire to exploit her talent turns her attraction into revulsion. Rather than marry him and live happily ever after, she devotes her energies to a cause and finds a new life for herself as an activist. In short, Rapunzel becomes a fully "liberated" woman.

A similar reversal occurs in "Cinderella." As the men engage in a free-for-all over her, she is attacked by envious women. Only the chiming of the bell at midnight saves her, for her splendid attire disappears, and she is left clad in her rags. Her response is surprising: she stretches and scratches her ribs before saying with a smile: "Kill me now if you want, sisters, but at least I'll die in comfort." The focus of her attackers' envy changes; they ripped off "their bodices, corsets, shoes, and every other confining garment. They danced and jumped and screeched in sheer joy, comfortable at last in their shifts and bare feet" (36). The men are too engaged in their fighting to notice that the women are now dressed for "the boudoir." After the men kill each other, the women dress them in their discarded clothes, announcing to the media that the fight developed because of a threat to expose the cross-dressing of the prince and his cronies. They then establish a firm to manufacture "CinderWear," comfortable clothes for women. "Through self-determination and clever marketing, they all—even the mother and sisters of step—lived happily ever after" (36–37).

Here again, the heroine moves from ignorance towards enlightenment. The Cinderella who was eager to don uncomfortable clothing and foot-destroying shoes to attract male attention discovers the folly of her desires. Thoroughly disgusted with men, as Rapunzel had been with her prince, Cinderella bonds with her former rivals and devotes her life to a cause. Other female characters also follow this path. In "Rumpelstiltskin," having guessed the "vertically challenged" man's name because he is wearing his badge from the Little People's Empowerment Seminar, Esmeralda moves to California to open a birth-control clinic, "where she showed other womyn how not
to be enslaved by their reproductive systems and lived to the end of her days as a
dedicated, fulfilled single person” (16). Snow White and her former rival oust the
dwarves and plan to start “a womyn’s spa and conference center ... where we can hold
retreats, caucuses, and ovariums for the sisters of the world” (56). In “Little Red Riding
Hood,” the wolf, the grandmother, and Red Riding Hood “set up an alternative
household based on mutual respect and cooperation and they lived together in the
woods happily ever after” (4).

Stories with men as the central characters also resolve in new ways. The emperor,
whose new clothes (or lack thereof) traditionally bring embarrassment, is rescued by a
quick thinking peasant who, in response to cries that the emperor is naked, says: “No,
he isn’t. The emperor is merely endorsing a clothing-optional life style” (8). Others
quickly follow and the deceitful tailor, far from being vindicated, packs up his needle
and is never heard from again. When the wolf dies from a coronary trying to blow down
the third little pig’s house, the three pigs liberate their homeland by attacking a resort
complex built on their former property. After slaying the rest of the “cruel wolf
oppressors,” they establish “a model democracy with free education, universal health
care, and affordable housing for everyone” (12). When the three codependent billy goats
gruff confront the troll, the story ends, not with the destruction of the troll by the
strongest of the goats, but rather with a struggle with him about who is to blame for
their former animosity. The bridge collapses under their combined weight as they argue
for their being mostly to blame: “On their way down, they each felt relieved that they
would finally get what they deserved, plus, as a bonus, a little extra guilt for the fate of
the others” (21). The giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk” is a gentle soul who persuades
Jack to join his commune in the sky where there is less work to do. For his part, Jack
“gradually learned not to judge people based on their size ever again, except for those
shorter than he” (71).

New Villains, New Morals: Dis-Identification

Although the use of irony and satire makes these texts polyvalent (in that audiences
may value the meanings of the stories differently), the caricaturing of traditional figures
and the plot reversals accentuate cleavages in society, working against the (re-)building
of community in the face of social change. Regardless of how one views proposals for
political correctness, one cannot escape the highlighting of certain tensions in contem-
porary society. The use of satire and irony, then, creates differentiation between the
sides of the controversy, emphasizing differences and insecurities.

The implicit commentary on gender roles is especially clear. Women become
liberated and self-aware “womyn” who reject the traditional living happily ever after.
Their experiences with men, individually and collectively, leave them disillusioned and
eager to join with their sisters in various livelihoods. Even before her experiences with
Rumpelstiltskin, for example, Esmeralda recognizes “the exploitativeness of the patri-
archy,” and before meeting the real estate developer frog, the princess is “tired of
beating her head against the male power structure” (14, 63).

One consequence of their “enlightenment” is bonding with other women. Cinder-
elia’s rivals join with her in CinderWear, and Snow White and the Queen create a
business together. Other women, like Esmeralda and Rapunzel, dedicate themselves to
causes, although Garner’s satire extends even to these commitments; ovariums and a
non-profit Foundation for the Free Proliferation of Music are clearly ridiculed.
Unfortunately, this bonding between women does not produce a kinder, gentler world. The princess drowns the frog/real estate developer; Cinderella and her friends scapegoat the men as cross-dressers; Little Red Riding Hood calls the “log-fuel technician” a “Neanderthal” who trusts his weapon to think for him; Rapunzel leaves the prince and witch stranded in a tower with no means of escape. In fact, these revised stories are filled with examples of unpleasant endings that replicate and exaggerate the violence in the originals.

The men in Garner’s stories do not share the conversion experiences of the women. The “log-fuel technician” does not understand Little Red Riding Hood’s reaction to his bursting into the grandmother’s cabin; Cinderella’s prince and his cronies move from discussing jousting to fighting viciously over who will gain her favors. At other times, the men are exposed as charlatans, as with the tailor who crafts the emperor’s new clothes; fools, as when Rumpelstiltskin forgets to remove his name tag; or as victims of the new women, as with the Seven Towering Giants who must abandon their home, or Snow White’s impotent prince who becomes a harmless tennis pro at her spa.

Garner’s failure to depict the men being converted may be strategic. When his male characters are oblivious to feminist initiatives, they appear to be resistant to the “silliness” of the women; they are not led astray by the faddish excesses to which the women fall prey. From this angle, women can be seen as conniving, power-hungry, hypocritical, and generally misguided—all characteristics stereotypically attributed to them and inconsistent with the rational side of the human race. Because Garner by his own admission views political correctness as ridiculous, his portrayal of female characters may reflect his view that women (or at least feminists) are largely responsible for these excesses.

Clearly, the message of these new bedtime stories is that patriarchy is outmoded, that men are dolts, and that women, when they have the opportunity, can take charge of their own lives. Cleavages between the sexes are exaggerated as women are ridiculed and men are diminished. Thus, the emergence of powerful women does not produce a kinder world, but rather an environment in which women dominate and spurn men as partners.

The plot reversals, however, do not provide a transvaluation of values, but rather reinscribe existing institutions, albeit with new leaders in positions of power. Implicit in all the stories is the suggestion that politically correct attitudes perpetuate violence, hierarchy, and intolerance for opponents. Rather than correcting a social order and offering a happy reconciliation, these new stories accentuate differences and replace the old oppressive social structure with one that deprivileges those formerly in control. A further ironic twist occurs as each story endorses capitalism, materialism, and power, and equates these values with political correctness. For example, in “Cinderella,” capitalism and a sense of economic gain at the expense of others is validated with the establishment of CinderWear. Those who step outside the capitalist realm espouse clearly ludicrous causes: ovariums and the free proliferation of music. These depictions of materialistic, power-seeking characters who gauge every situation in line with their own interests suggest that the advocates of political correctness are as corrupt and self-seeking as those to whom they allegedly object and often defeat in the stories.

Significantly, these reversals accentuate social cleavages regardless of the readers’ attitudes toward political correctness. Those who oppose the changes political correctness entails may focus on the absurdity and destructiveness of the new characters and the new endings. Whether it is Cinderwear, the Foundation for the Free Proliferation
of Music, or ovariums, the new “womyn” are linked, in opponents’ eyes, to ridiculous endeavors and neurotic lifestyles. On the other hand, supporters of political correctness will applaud the upheaval of traditional power structures, enjoy the new roles for “womyn” together with the men’s just comeuppance, and delight in the many new twists in the stories. But both types of reader are encouraged to see dis-identification between groups as integral to the implementation of politically correct perspectives. By adopting satire and burlesque as his modes, Garner ensures that opponents and supporters of political correctness see their differences writ large in his new stories. Garner also links political correctness to lifestyle issues largely unrelated to the movement: women’s reproductive rights, enthusiasm for healthier food, and even contemporary psychotherapy. In so doing, he is able to capture other antipathies the reader may feel and use them to fuel his satire against political correctness. By broadening his palette to include these largely extraneous topics, Garner accentuates still other social cleavages.

Rhetorical Implications: Satire and Irony, Comic and Burlesque

The Limits of Satire and Irony as Strategies for Social Change

Coming at a critical juncture in the heated debate over political correctness, Garner’s collection of revised fairy tales was intended to offer a counterweight and response to those advocating new language patterns and sensibilities. Five factors in Garner’s rhetorical approach enervate his efforts to accomplish his particular political agenda.

First, satire and irony, the two forms of humor on which Garner relies, are inherently and inescapably polyvalent. Both require the audience to work at understanding the author’s purpose. The steps that Booth delineates for the “correct” decoding of irony, discussed earlier, are mirrored by the audience’s attempt to interpret satire. Indeed, Garner’s ability to control the meaning of his satirical attacks is limited by the polyvalent nature of the text.

Second, because satire and irony both work by highlighting incongruities, they may inadvertently make transformation possible. As they hold up new ideas to ridicule and disparagement, they also introduce the possibility that alternate perspectives exist. As Kenneth Burke notes, “The universe would appear to be something like a cheese; it can be sliced in an infinite number of ways—and when one has chosen his own pattern of slicing, he finds that other men’s cuts fall at the wrong places.” Still, the recognition that other cuts are possible may alter settled predispositions.

Third, the structure of Garner’s book offers different ways for diverse audience members to read his message. Using fairy tales for his satire of politically correct language is, in some ways, a clever ploy. Certainly, Garner is responding to various initiatives, some of which persist today, to rewrite traditional materials or to create new stories without offensive stereotypes and constrictive language, but his choice also reflects his view of the extent to which the proponents of political correctness will go to promote social changes. In one sense, his choice of fairy tales is itself a *reductio ad absurdum*: that activists might assault these benign texts suggests their extremism. Despite some advantages, the integrity and individuality of fairy tales poses a substantial rhetorical obstacle to a successful sustained an attack on political correctness. As Garner moves from one story to another, his irony and satire must shift gears. Although “Cinderella” may be an excellent canvas for ridiculing non-sexist language
and attitudes, the “Three Co-Dependent Billy Goats Gruff” does not provide the same target. Garner, adept at humor, goes from ridiculing attempts at non-sexism to mocking current psychological perspectives. In the same way, the “Emperor’s New Clothes” and “The Three Little Pigs” offer less highly charged topics for Garner’s satire than do tales such as “Goldilocks” or “Rapunzel.” Even within stories, Garner’s broad base of subjects for attack may diminish his efforts to resist the more significant proposed social changes. So, for example, his description of the contents of Little Red Riding Hood’s basket—“fresh fruit and mineral water”—is clearly an attempt to make fun of contemporary trends. When that description is followed quickly by his ridiculing of efforts to avoid ageism and sexism, a reader has abundant opportunities to pick and choose among various elements as a stimulus for laughter. Thus, one may relish his ridicule of modern lifestyle choices—“mineral water”—but find his references to ageism and sexism far less amusing and acceptable. The individual integrity of the stories, coupled with Garner’s broad range of topics for ridicule, works against his stories having the coherent force that Swift was able to accomplish in “A Modest Proposal.”

Fourth, integral to Garner’s irony and satire is a tendency toward *reductio ad absurdum*, which may encourage some readers to accept moderate forms of political correctness. In many of his caricatures and plot reversals, Garner eschews any temperate measures associated with political correctness and only depicts the most extreme proposals. His alternate spellings of “woman” and “women”—“wommon” and “womyn”—are excellent examples. Under Garner’s pen, the tailor in “The Emperor’s New Clothes” is described as “decorum-impaired,” the witch in “Rapunzel” is “kindness-impaired,” Goldilocks is “melanin-impoverished,” Snow White’s name suggests “colorist thinking,” and the prince’s impotence in “Snow White” is renamed “involuntary suspension of phallocentric activity.” Clearly, these are examples of politically correct language carried to extremes.

In the same way, Garner’s sympathy for some characters is exaggerated. “Jack and the Beanstalk” furnishes an additional extended example: because “they were excluded from the normal circles of economic activity” and lived “in straits of direness,” the mother instructs Jack to take the cow to market to sell it. Garner presents the cow’s perspective:

Never mind the thousands of gallons of milk they had stolen from her! Never mind the hours of pleasure their bovine animal companion had provided! And forget about the manure they had appropriated for their garden! She was now just another piece of property to them. Jack, who didn’t realize that non-human animals have as many rights as human animals—perhaps even more—did as his mother asked (67–68).

Of course, Jack exchanges the cow for a handful of beans from a man who persuades him to accept the exchange on the basis of the damage done by cows to the ecosystem and the promise of “as much protein as that entire cow but none of the fat or sodium” (68). His mother, dismayed by his actions, begins attending a support group for Mothers of Storybook Children. As the story progresses, Jack discovers a “self-actualizing harp,” a giant who is not “knowledge impaired” but rather interested in cultural exchange, and a “cloud commune” that is preferable to his earlier life on the farm. As the details of this story show, Garner’s satire and irony often depend on his depiction of the extremes of political correctness.

This *reductio ad absurdum* approach is often amusing as it suggests the perils of extreme political correctness, but Garner’s exaggerations make more moderate alternate prac-
tives less daunting. In contrast to the extremes he depicts, proposals for “chair” inside of “chairman” or “s/he” rather than simply “he” in certain situations seem more reasonable and less objectionable. In a sense then, the use of reductio ad absurdum to ridicule political correctness may pave the way for the more moderate changes offered by many supporters.

Fifth, as we have noted, Garner goes far beyond political correctness in his attacks. In almost every story, he interlaces his satire of political correctness with jabs at other features of modern society. From the mineral water and fat-free, sodium-free snacks for Grandmother in Little Red Riding Hood’s basket of goodies to the frog/real estate developer, Garner uses the stories to highlight what seems to be a list of pet peeves about contemporary U.S. life. These side issues are varied: lawyers, country music, birth control, and opposition to capitalism. Garner turns each to his humorous ends, but adding these extraneous attacks undercuts his primary rhetorical agenda. Readers who share Garner’s disdain for political correctness may find other of his satiric targets less objectionable. With his scatter-gun satire, Garner may step on the toes of potential supporters.

In other words, the use of irony and satire as primary rhetorical strategies, the possibility of new perspectives through incongruity, the use of a group of fairy stories rather than a single text as a vehicle, the reliance on reductio ad absurdum for humor, and the scatter-gun attack on other features of national life, all work together to undercut the systematic rhetorical force of Garner’s book. The possibilities of multiple interpretations of the stories, however, both sympathetic and antagonistic to political correctness, may explain the popularity of the work; its humor is engaging regardless of whether the reader accepts the target of the satire or the thrust of the irony. In addition, Garner’s use of reductio ad absurdum reflects political correctness at its most extreme; any more moderate steps seem, by comparison, far less objectionable.

These mixed messages permit a wide spectrum of readers to see both the impact of the excesses of political correctness and the corrective provided in some cases. For “Rapunzel,” we may chuckle at the proposals for “life-like Rapunzel dolls with their very own miniature stereo Tune-Towers” as a comic corrective for the current tendency to commercialize every aspect of children’s lives. Readers can see this tendency as mistaken rather than evil. On the other hand, descriptions of the witch as “kindness-impaired,” of the father’s efforts to “liberate” lettuce from the witch’s garden, which was a “nauseating attempt to impose human notions of order onto Nature,” and of the witch’s disposition as the result of factors in her upbringing, clearly satirize the excesses often associated with political correctness and its alleged attempts to spare the feelings of all. This admixture of attitudes, comic and satiric, may work to mitigate Garner’s attacks on political correctness. In some senses, his depictions of the corrective impact of some strategies associated with political correctness may smooth the way for readers to accept some of its benefits without embracing its more extreme forms.

In essence, Garner’s immensely popular work lacks sustained rhetorical coherence. His stories may provoke laughter on many sides, but they are less effective in stimulating resistance to political correctness. His exaggerated examples of political correctness run amok may create less resistance to more moderate reforms because they open new perspectives by incongruity. By making fun of the extremes of political correctness, Garner may, in fact, have diminished widespread resistance to it. At the same time, Garner’s approach may have encouraged more profound divisions in U.S. society, as we will explain below.
Comic and the Burlesque: A War Between Frames of Acceptance and Rejection

Integral to irony and satire are the reversals and caricatures typical of Garner’s tales. Significantly, in Garner’s work these caricatures and reversals shift the frame of the stories from the comic to the burlesque. The subtle shift from the bemused laughter of the comic to the weak chortle of the burlesque marks a critical moment for readers. With this shift, the reader/participant is urged to move from a frame of acceptance to a frame of rejection. As Burke observes:

The writer of burlesque ... is content to select the externals of behavior, driving them to a “logical conclusion” that becomes their “reduction to absurdity.” By program, he obliterates his victim’s discriminations. He is “heartless.” He converts every “perhaps” into a “positively.” He deliberately suppresses any consideration of the “mitigating circumstances” that would put his subject in a better light.50

As he adds later: “The methods of caricature do not equip us to understand the full complexities of sociality—hence they warp our programs of action and, by identification, humiliate the manipulator of them, thereby making cynical self-interest the most logical of policies.”51 In other words, in contrast to traditional tales that supply “happy” endings in which goodness and virtue triumph and the heroines live happily ever after with the heroes, these revised tales paint a bleak picture of relationships between the sexes and suggest that greed, power, and exploitation are the order of the day.

Garner alternates between comedy, satire, and burlesque both within and between tales. So, for example, Cinderella’s “individual deity proxy” humorously points out the discomforts of women’s clothing and makeup, descriptions with which many women can identify regardless of their attitudes towards political correctness. Cinderella’s comment when midnight strikes and she is returned to her rags in the face of her raging rivals is similarly comic in the Burkean sense: “Kill me now if you want, sisters, but at least I’ll die in comfort” (36). Although most adult women and men have probably experienced the sense of relief that comes from removing constrictive clothing, Cinderella’s reaction produces widespread chuckles as readers reflect on our communal slavishness to uncomfortable attire, particularly for formal occasions. In the same way, the fate of the tailor in “The Emperor’s New Clothes” or of the real estate developer-frog prince stand in comic contrast to the satiric endings of “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Rapunzel.” The demise of the Billy Goats Gruff along with the troll and the accidental death of Foxy Loxy the lawyer, followed by a clearly frivolous slew of lawsuits by his descendants, lack the satiric bite of Snow White’s rejection of the prince or the bears’ devouring of a predatory Goldilocks.

The sometimes uneasy admixture of satire with comedy moves readers rather abruptly from a frame of acceptance in the comedy sequences to a frame of rejection in the satiric sequences. When these fluctuations occur within a story, the conclusion may make clear the frame that Garner wishes his audience to adopt. Because each story is self-contained, however, a reader may move from a story with an intended satiric bent to another that is closer to pure comedy. In a coherent work, these fluctuations might frustrate readers’ efforts to develop a stable sense of the meaning, but Garner’s alternating of comedy and satire from story to story opens the possibility that readers of different persuasions can sustain their initial attitudes toward political correctness, only becoming more dismissive of alternate views. For example, Esmeralda’s ability to guess the manipulative elf’s name simply by reading his name tag from the Little
People’s Empowerment Seminar pokes fun at his forgetfulness, a trait many of us experience, and satirizes empowerment groups as a whole. The comic frame overlaps the satiric, acceptance wars with rejection.

A second implication of the interaction between the comic and the burlesque is that the synergy actually alters the essential characteristics of each frame. For example, as the stories shift from a comic to a burlesque frame, the comic frame loses its power as an acceptance frame that encourages communication. In other words, as readers progress through each story, the derisive caricatures and spiteful ridicule gradually dismantle the identification created by the comic frame at the beginning. The clever word choices and caricatures consistent with the comic frame encourage audiences to laugh with glee as they recognize themselves or others in the characters. The move from the comic to the burlesque highlights the moment when audiences are no longer laughing with the characters but rather at them. As a result, the well-rounded form of the comic breaks into the partial, incomplete form of the burlesque. In the case of Politically Correct Bedtime Stories, the tales are incomplete because Garner presents the characters in the worst possible light, essentializing them into politically correct or politically incorrect beings. This gradual dehumanization of the characters forces greater distance between the audience and the politically incorrect offenders. Burke appraises such a strategy, arguing that “This polemic, negativistic genius [stressing the no more strongly than the yes] throws the emphasis stylistically upon the partiality of rejection rather than the completeness of acceptance.” In other words, the burlesque frame encourages readers to view political correctness as an inherently flawed system of values, thereby overshadowing the comic frame’s emphasis on political correctness as sometimes mistaken in its approach.

A third effect of the combined comic and burlesque forms is that they work together to discourage opportunities for audience rebuttal, particularly from advocates of political correctness who are the focus of derision in Garner’s tales. Overzealous, lacking a sense of humor, and taking fairy tales/story books too seriously are some of the comments that might accompany a response to criticism of Politically Correct Bedtime Stories. The discouragement of communication characteristic of the burlesque overshadows the open communication sanctioned by the comic frame. Garner trespasses on the side of ridiculing potential detractors of his account into silence, of providing the final word on the political correctness issue, thereby discouraging further conversation and promoting increased isolation and negativism among the various political correctness camps.

Fourth, because some frames are divisive, they also prevent transcendence. Whereas the comic frame of Politically Correct Bedtime Stories allows readers to transcend themselves by identifying with the mistaken ways of characters, the burlesque frame encourages readers to view their world through polarized lenses. Because readers will proceed from the beginning of the story to the end, the comic frame draws them into active engagement with the text, but the burlesque provides the final word on which framework audiences should adopt to evaluate political correctness and which motives to choose in order to justify action. In so doing, Garner urges readers to view differences as irreconcilable and to essentialize others on the basis of a single motive.

Despite some clear advantages to Garner’s approach (for example, multiple audience appeal), shifting frames from the comic to the burlesque has serious limitations when discussing issues of public import. Garner’s choice of the fairy tale medium, for example, does not accurately reflect the intricacies of the issues embedded in political
correctness or the problems of living in a multicultural society. Nor does this medium allow for a comprehensive depiction or analysis of the ideological underpinnings and subtle complexities involved in the debate over the meaning and implications of political correctness. Garner's burlesque frames paint hero/villain dichotomies, ruthlessly stereotyping politically correct advocates as violent, irrational individuals. Often these characters act out of politically correct motives in defiance of common sense; on other occasions, as in the Cinderella story, when it is to their advantage, they eagerly embrace the very values (such as capitalism and materialism) that their earlier political correctness eschewed. Fools and hypocrites abound. Moreover, Garner conflates the political correctness approach with underlying politically correct values so that a rejection of one necessitates a rejection of the other. In this sense, Garner reduces complex problems to simplistic, seemingly conclusive solutions, stereotyping the politically correct and promoting a skewed vision of the goals of political correctness.

In addition, Garner ignores other means of persuasion or opinion presentation, such as a comic frame for the duration of each story, which might have induced laughter at the idiosyncrasies and failures of the political correctness movement and respect for its laudable intentions. As Burke comments:

[The comic frame will appear the most serviceable for the handling of human relationships...it avoids the antithetical dangers of cynical debunking, that paralyze social relationships by discovering too constantly the purely materialistic ingredients in human effort. The comic frame is charitable, but at the same time it is not gullible. It keeps us alive to the ways in which people “cash in on” their moral assets, and even use moralistic euphemisms to conceal purely materialistic purposes—but it can recognize as much without feeling its disclosure to be the last word on human motivation.]

In his use of a burlesque frame, Garner crosses the line from the comical to the vindictive and polemical, stressing the negative and risking the perils that caustic, sardonic commentaries invite—namely, divisiveness. In a society in which many educational, social, and political leaders are concerned about the quality of civic engagement and dialogue in the public sphere, Garner's predominantly satiric critique is troublesome. Certainly, Garner's use of humor as the dominant means of persuasion is not unique. In fact, similar strategies are evident in the “discussion” of other contemporary issues such as affirmative action and abortion. Because the combined use of the comic, burlesque, and tragic dissuades critical thinking and/or responses, information regarding important public issues, when conveyed in this manner, frequently goes unnoticed and unexamined. The challenge for critical rhetoricians and students of public address, then, is to recognize humor as a powerful rhetorical strategy, to identify its various forms and uses, and to highlight the challenge it can pose to open debate of controversial issues.

Notes

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1James Finn Garner, Politically Correct Bedtime Stories (New York: Macmillan, 1994), inside cover. Subsequent citations from this work are in parentheses in the text.


3Lyall, C16.


Perhaps inattention to Garner's book results from the emphasis in public address scholarship on texts/speeches of prominent political and social leaders; accordingly, opportunities to discuss humor as a primary rhetorical strategy are limited and/or neglected.

For a discussion of humor and the comic frame, see A. Cheree Carlson, "Limitations on the Comic Frame: Some Witty Women of the Nineteenth Century," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988): 320. She notes that research on humor in the communication field tends to have an empirical focus.


A notable exception is Carlson's examination of the nineteenth-century women's movement in terms of three phases of humorous strategies–comic (1820–50), satiric (1850–70), and burlesque (1870–80). See "Limitations," 310–22.


A text of this speech is available from the Accuracy in Academia website http://www.academia.org or from http://www.geocities.com/bobmeyer. According to the information on these websites, accessed on October 17, 2002, this speech has been delivered a number of times in various venues.

"Political correctness" is a polysemic term. Despite disavowals by proponents of political correctness of their having a more extensive, even malevolent agenda, opponents connect the term with an entire slate of activities and issues that they see as undermining U.S. society.


24 Elsen, 3.

25 Elsen, 3.


27 The relationships between satire and irony can be confusing. For the purposes of this essay, we will suggest that irony is a technique used with satiric intent.


29 Burke, 171.

30 Burke, 41, 42.

31 Burke, 43.

32 Hugh Duncan makes a similar point, arguing that comedy brings social differences “to light in laughter which makes communication possible.” Hugh Duncan, *Communication and Social Order* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1985), 494.

33 Meyer, 315.

34 Meyer, 317.


38 Booth, 106.

39 Booth, 10.

40 Booth, 11.

41 Booth, 15.


45 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 41.


50 John Fiske makes a similar point in explaining the popularity of television shows: “In order to be popular, television must reach a wide diversity of audiences and, to be chosen by them, must be an open text that allows the various subcultures to generate meanings from it that meet the needs of their own subcultural identities. It must therefore be polysemic.” (392). In the same way, the polyvalent nature of Garner’s text allows for multiple valuations of the stories, thereby broadening its rhetorical appeal.


52 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 93.

53 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 55.

54 Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 22.
