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Kristin Lems
National-Louis University

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Woody Guthrie, America's Merry Prankster

Kristin Lems

2012 marked the centennial year of the birth of Woody Guthrie, and celebratory events from concerts to conferences marked that year as an occasion to explore the life, times, and impact of America's one-of-a-kind, multi-gifted composer, writer and personality. The organizers of the September 8, 2012 conference at Penn State University convened panels which covered many aspects of Guthrie's eclectic and dramatic life. The presentation on which this article is based situated Guthrie in the larger folkloric tradition of a "merry prankster," using examples from history and folklore to make the case that Woody Guthrie's life follows this tradition.

The "Merry Prankster" in history and folklore

A "merry prankster" is a colorful person, real or legendary, who pokes fun at authority and the rich, powerful, and arrogant. The merry prankster appears small and powerless, but manages to outwit his opponents, often summing up the situation with witty one-liners. One example is the Mullah Nassrudin, a real man from the apex of the Ottoman Empire whose antics and exploits are still part of oral tradition in many regions of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The Mullah, sometimes called Nasreddin Hoca (pronounced Hoja) is usually depicted in rumpled clothing, sitting crookedly on a small donkey, sporting an oversized turban, perhaps a west Asian "Okie" who seems to not quite catch on to the ways of more respectable folk. Here is a typical tale:

Once Nasreddin was invited to deliver a sermon. When he got on the pulpit, he asked, "Do you know what I am going to say?" The audience replied "No," so he announced, "I have no desire to speak to people who don't even know what I will be talking about!" and left. People felt embarrassed, called him back again the next day. This time, when he asked the same question, they replied "Yes." Nasreddin said, "Well, since you already know what I am going to say, I won't waste any more of your time!" and left. Now the people were really perplexed. They decided to try once again. The hoca asked the same question, "Do you know what I am going to say?" Now the people were prepared and so half of them answered "Yes" while the other half replied "No." So Nasreddin said, "Let the half who know what I am going to say, tell it to the half who don't," and left.¹

Another real person who achieved renown as a prankster was Till Eulenspiegel — a man believed to have been born in 1350 in Saxony. Till's name became enshrined in the genre of "fool's literature" of the Middle Ages and Renaissance as a symbol of a witty outsider mocking the powerful and religious. Till Eulenspiegel is to this day a much beloved character in European folklore and a statue of Till can be found in Brunswick, Germany, one of several towns that claim him as their own.² There is even a well-known orchestral work about him, the tone poem *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (*Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*), by Richard Strauss (1894), and musical and literary works about Till Eulenspiegel can be found in Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and Germany.

Till's misadventures included being baptized three times, winning a jesting contest against a court jester, and, like the Emperor in the famous tale "The Emperor's New Clothes," challenging anyone to see the blank white picture he has "painted" by saying those who are illegitimate cannot see it. There are also many tales in which he prides himself on taking directions very literally, somewhat like the befuddled folk hero of contemporary American children's literature, Amelia Bedelia.³ Till delighted in making people laugh at the rich and powerful and calling the bluff of the high and mighty in a time in which fanatic religion ruled. Although the exact circumstances of Till Eulenspiegel's death are not known, in Strauss's work, Till meets death by hanging because he has displeased the theocratic Christian state; being a heretic was no laughing matter.

Woody as a Merry Prankster

In many ways, Woody Guthrie is an American merry prankster. Small in stature but large of intelligence, he used his wits, musical creativity, and people skills to defend the poor against the rich and powerful. He consistently made enemies of the privileged and those in authority, quitting and losing jobs, and he had to find clever ways to wriggle his way out of his problems, while always standing up for his beliefs and singing out boldly about them.

Born in 1912 in Okemah, Oklahoma, Woody experienced many early tragedies, including the burning to death of his older sister in a house fire, the dust storms of Oklahoma and Texas that wiped away everything that grew, and the illness and institutionalization of his mother, whose degenerative Huntington's disease was not understood at the time. The sometimes extreme poverty of Woody's family, along with a nationwide economic depression and drumbeat of a coming world war, added to the misery. Yet, Woody found a way to survive and even thrive.

When he moved to California and got a radio spot on the Los Angeles

station KFVD, he had his first opportunity to speak directly to a larger audience, through the radio, and he developed his public voice through songs, stories and a newspaper column he wrote that criticized corrupt politicians, injustice, and especially the sanctimonious. Pete Seeger said Woody's "best songs ... seemed to capture glints of humor in the middle of tragedy."⁴ Indeed, Woody honed his homespun wisdom and trenchant wit through many radio shows and through hundreds of original songs. He also sprinkled witty sayings in his bountiful letters; in one to Alan Lomax, for example, he wrote, "The average elections are about as useful as a slop jar without a bottom in it."⁵

In a letter to the Library of Congress in 1942 about an anthology of his songs that they had just published, and mindful of the fact that it is a government office, Woody mischievously suggested the following:

Is it handy there for congressmen and senators to come in and sing? I hope they bring their fiddles and guitars around and hit off a few of the most radical tunes. They are awful easy to sing, and you can sing them drunk or sober, it don't matter, just a matter of personal choice. I tried them both ways. The senators, too. You can elect just about as good a one way or the other. I'd like for them to specially learn to sing #56, Looking for that New Deal Now, which is a good one for the boys to recollect once in a while between poker games....⁶

Woody learned the power of humor to tell a story. In one of his collections of essays and poetry, *Pastures of Plenty*, he says, "There is something very funny about almost everything that happens to you if you do a good job of telling exactly what took place."⁷ When he is about to meet famed singer and dissident Paul Robeson for the first time, he confesses that he is moved to "try my very best to think up some kind of a good joke to pull off" and when meeting Robeson, does exactly that. He says to the famed operatic bass, "It's really that piano player of yours that makes your voicebox sound as good as it does," which elicits much delight from Robeson.⁸ Guthrie even refers to these attempts at injecting wit into a situation as showing he is a "professional jokester in my own right."⁹ Pete Seeger calls Woody "one of the best storytellers I ever heard," and it was true in his speaking, singing, and writing.¹⁰

During one of Woody's three tours with the Merchant Marine in the Second World War, his ship, *The Sea Porpoise*, was docked in port in Sicily. On shore, Woody jested with the poor in Palermo, giving out small amounts of money, and shouted "I will give money to babies only!" Upon hearing that, people came forward:

I tried to be careful and put a small bill only into the baby-hands appearing before my eyes.... I shouted jokes and told several of the

older girls that they were not babies and there was no use to pretend.... [T]hey joked and laughed far louder and longer than I did, and ran into their homes nearby, and rushed back out with little baby brothers and sisters...."¹¹

When on the *Sea Porpoise*, which was mined twice, Woody encountered the perils of war — and the depredations of segregation. Black GIs were housed in the hold of the ship, where it was much more turbulent and crowded. Woody, who was a dishwasher, sang for the black soldiers in the hold and in the shower, where he was joined by black singers; the melodious effect created by their singing in the shower along with Woody brought many white marines down to see what was going on. Citing overcrowding, Woody suggested everybody move upstairs to a larger room, effectively integrating the ship on the spot, and thereafter. In this clever way, he accomplished the actions of a merry prankster, in its best tradition.¹²

In his posthumously published book, *Seeds of Man*, Woody describes a fitful and restless group of Guthries, himself included, hoping to find and stake a claim on a silver mine in the Texas Panhandle. They fail, but have many adventures along the way. The men were living in a shack along with many Mexicans who were helping them prospect, and running a whiskey still. In this picaresque, almost Joycean erotic epic, in which characters speak in colorful accents and regional dialects so thick that you almost have to read the book out loud, the protagonist (Woody, told in first person) outsmarts two border patrol officers who come to examine their shack by convincing them they will be stung by bees if they approach the building in which the undocumented men are sleeping. "Awful bad humor, them there bees are in," says Woody. "There's not enough honey drippins' left in them hivey crates to feed 'em a decent meal on. All of 'ems madder than a wet hen. They're in there a-stingin one another ta death." His yarn does the trick, and the officers hastily depart.¹³

Woody did not always prevail in his ceaseless, almost involuntary behavior that rocked that boat — and sometimes upset those around him. In fact, Woody spent time in jail for writing a pornographic letter to a woman he knew slightly, who reported it; he was given several opportunities to "lose" the letter or to apologize, but he stubbornly insisted on his right to free speech. His Merchant Seaman's papers were revoked by the Office of Naval Intelligence after his third voyage on account of "Communist sympathies," and his ardent arguments that he was a patriot fighting fascism did not sway the decision. His progressing mental and physical decline added to a self-presentation that worked against him during his last decade of life, but many music lovers and academics have again seen the larger view of this authentic American genius.

Woody's actions and the content of his songs successfully challenged the rich and powerful, through wit, humor and folksy wisdom. Accounts of Guthrie's life in academic sources underplay his impish wit, and his life story can be read as a tragedy or a noble struggle against tragic circumstances. However, the primary sources reveal instead a triumph: abundant songs, poems, drawings, books, and sketches pouring out of him at all times. In all of them, Woody keeps up a constant stream of inner and outer speech to amuse himself and any who care to listen, musing, regaling, and talking to himself as he picks his way through life's ironies, delights, and complexities with a "devouring curiosity."¹⁴ Perhaps it will be not only his prolific topical songs, but Woody's populist humor, fantastical tales, and hilarious one liners that will truly embed him in the larger American narrative.

NOTES

¹ Charlotte McPherson, "I Wonder What Nasreddin Hoca Would Say," *Today's Zaman* (10 August, 2014). Available at http://www.todayszaman.com/columnist/charlotte-mcpherson/i-wonder-what-nasreddin-hoca-would-say_355170.html. Accessed 4 April, 2015.

² Rachael Haering, "Till Eugenspiegel Was Here," *Fairietales* (2013). Available at <http://www.fairietales.com/writings/till2.html>. Accessed 4 April, 2015.

³ Peggy Parish and Herman Parish, *Amelia Bedelia* series (New York: HarperCollins, 1996-2008).

⁴ Pete Seeger, *The Incomplete Folksinger* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), p. 214.

⁵ Woody Guthrie, "Vote for Bloat" (1940). Library of Congress, *Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song: Correspondence, 1940-1950*. Available at <http://www.loc.gov/item/afcwwgbib000037/>. Accessed 4 April, 2015.

⁶ Woody Guthrie to Library of Congress (c. 1942). Library of Congress, *Woody Guthrie and the Archive of American Folk Song: Correspondence, 1940-1950*. Available at <http://www.loc.gov/item/afcwwgbib000010/>. Accessed 4 April, 2015.

⁷ Woody Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, ed. Dave Marsh and Harold Leventhal (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 48.

⁸ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 67.

⁹ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 67.

¹⁰ Seeger, p. 262.

¹¹ Guthrie, *Pastures of Plenty*, p. 126.

¹² The most comprehensive account of Guthrie's Merchant Marine days is Jim Longhi, *Woody, Cisco and Me: Seamen Three in the Merchant Marine* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

¹³ Woody Guthrie, *Seeds of Man* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), p. 363.

¹⁴ Seeger, p. 54.