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BRIEF AND CONTROVERSIAL

[We are delighted to receive the two brief, unsolicited essays we print on this page and trust that they will inspire responses and new offerings on other topics.]

SHIRLEY TEMPLE: FEMINIST HEROINE?

I have fallen in love at first sight, and, as might be expected, I want to share my happiness with the world. The object of my affections is a curly-headed, dimpled charmer who has captured my heart on the basis of only a few minutes here and there on the Saturday afternoon rerun movies. Maybe others love that adorable little Shirley Temple of the 1930's because she is irresistibly cute, but my adoration is based on her indomitable spirit, her courage, and her unwillingness to play the role of docile, passive, spectator female child.

Having been born a bit too late to see and appreciate Shirley Temple the first time around, I had never thought of her as a feminist heroine. But now that I see some of the movies that made her a famous child star, I realize that the roles could not have been of the "See Jane Watch Dick Run" variety. Her role is always a dominant one, often one in which she--at the age of 5 or 6--solves a problem or rescues an adult. Shirley Temple reruns may, in fact, be the ideal antidote to the sex-role stereotyping our children are spoon-fed in school.

In The Little Colonel (1935) the tiny moppet thwarts the villains and brings her feuding father and grandfather together again. When the bad men trap her invalid father, little Shirley sets out on her own through the mysterious woods, overcoming her natural fears, to get her grandfather's help. And when he at first refuses, she puts him in his place in no uncertain terms. Being a child of great intelligence, she also arranges to have the cook go for the sheriff while she goes for the grandfather.

In Curly Top (1935), little Shirley is instrumental in bringing together her big sister and their foster "father." But I admire her not so much for her knowledge of psychology as for her delightful response at the end of the film when her future brother-in-law gives her a string of pearls as a present. "Gee," she says. "They're nice. But I'd rather have roller skates." The message was so beautifully clear it's a wonder that the toy companies have missed it all these years!

As the Saturday afternoon reruns have progressed chronologically through the movies, Shirley has grown in wisdom and stature, but, I am happy to say, she has not yet settled into submissiveness. In Susannah of the Mounties (1939), she is the sweetheart of the Royal Canadian redcoats, as well as her real-life husband. For who else could have arranged for the Mounties and the Indians to smoke the peacepipe except our heroine Shirley Temple-Golden Hawk?

I think that feminist scholars in sociology or film may well want to examine carefully the old Shirley Temple, and not only with respect to her usefulness as a role model for a later generation of children. Why was Hollywood so ready to give a little girl those beautiful roles? Was it part of the thirties atmosphere, when actresses as a whole had better opportunities than in later periods? Was it because of the child actress herself? Would a careful examination of all of her films also show a positive treatment of minorities as well as females? While I await the scholarly answers, I shall at least be happy to know that on Saturday afternoons, as long as the reruns last, my children can escape from the sexist tripe of the Flintstones and I Dream of Jeannie!

Phyllis Zatlin Boring, Rutgers University

NEW (AND STILL SEXIST) SCHOLARSHIP

"Many distinguished women in the academic profession are far more exacting than a top sergeant at his most overpowering... women in authority are all too often relentless to others in their profession, yet savagely intolerant of criticism of their own performance by anyone else." They are, in fact, neurotic shrews like Shakespeare's Katharina, and should take to heart the improvement produced in her by her taming. Another neurotic shrew, Shakespeare's Cleopatra (not only a mistress and mother but one of the most sexually fascinating women of all time), "carries an affection of virility... to a sustained rejection of her biological role" (italics mine).

Fifty years ago, such pronouncements that able, forceful women are unfeminine and odiously egotistical might have been expected. But actually these appeared in 1971, in Hugh Richmond's Shakespeare's Sexual Comedy: A Mirror for Lovers (Bobbs-Merrill, 1971). Nor is this author an isolated crank; as a professor at Berkeley, he holds a position of prestige and influence. It is dispiriting to note how impervious establishment academic criticism remains to new feminist awareness. Scholarship, supposedly objective, continues to reveal unblushing oldstyle antifeminism, thoughtless acceptance of sexist assumptions, and obliviousness to women's point of view when it obviously should be taken into account, as in the presentation of male-female relationships in literature.

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WANTED: A GRADUATE STUDENT

...interested in feminist bibliography with training in English or U.S. literature, and available to work full-time in July and August. Needs to be in the New York area at least for weekly conferences. Needs access to an excellent library. Write to F. Howe, Box 210, State University of N. Y., Old Westbury, New York 11568.

(continued on page 12)