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## Cinderella, Marie Antoinette, and Sara: Roles and Role Models in A Little Princess

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Cinderella, Marie Antoinette, and Sara: Roles and Role Models in *A Little Princess***

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Role-model criticism, the easiest and often most logical form of criticism for children's literature, has fallen out of favor in our more theoretically sophisticated times. Toril Moi, surveying the state of feminist criticism in 1985, devoted a chapter to "Images of Women" criticism, finding it overly prescriptive and frequently self-contradictory in its calls for a "realistic" or accurate depiction of women's lives simultaneously with the desire for "strong, impressive female characters" (47). Since many real women (and men!) are neither strong nor impressive, the effort is doomed from the start. And the specific call for "role models" is problematic in itself, for literature is an exchange between writer and readers: readers separated widely by historical circumstance, out of the control of the author and yet affected by him/her in incalculable ways. My role model is your anti-heroine, even in the same text. Yet as a politically-charged reading strategy, Moi goes on to say, "Images of Women" criticism broke new ground: its "will to take historical and sociological factors into account must [in the mid-seventies, coming out of the New Criticism] have seemed both fresh and exciting" (49). She doesn't suggest, however, how we might revive the best efforts of such work without lapsing into a naive ahistoricism or a vulgar model of textual reflectionism.

But I believe we must. When I recently taught a children's literature course I had a solid syllabus, a thorough survey of the field with exemplary "readings" of several of the key texts; and I had a solid class, many of them education students who would be starting their first jobs as elementary school teachers in about six months. Despite my thorough preparation, though, I wasn't fully prepared for where some of our discussions went (whoever is?): my students wanted to know about role models in the books and tales we were reading. Wasn't Cinderella a role model? If so, for whom or what? Some objected to our feminist readings **[End Page 163]** of fairy tales. They granted that as role models, the fairy tale heroines were pretty passive and had limited options, but they argued that since children don't know that's a problem, it won't hurt them. Won't it? I had little to fall back on: I can't argue that children directly imitate the books they read, but I believe that just as the

ingredients in their breakfast cereal can harm (or help) them without their knowledge of them, so too can the ideological constructs of the books they read. But how to make the case?

My test case is *A Little Princess*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1905 novel. I think it will make a good test because it is in some ways about reading and what reading does to us—what we learn from books and stories, and how, and why; and because it is a widely read novel, encountered by many children (well, mostly girls) over the past century; and, perhaps most importantly, because it raises the question of role models on at least three levels. The heroine, Sara, functions explicitly as a role model and teacher for several of the girls in the novel; she herself relies on at least one role model in her attempts to think about who she is becoming; and she may also be a role model for the children who have read and continue to read her story (not to mention the adults).

Rachel M. Brownstein, whose *Becoming a Heroine* incorporates many of the best aspects of role-model criticism, writes of her education as a reader in the 1950s in ways that may seem familiar to girl-readers today. She claims that “[a]dmiration of the heroine of a romantic novel—beautiful, wise, beloved, and lucky—is love for an idealized image of oneself” (xiv). The popularity of *A Little Princess* over the course of this century suggests that Sara may function as just such an idealized image for many readers—among them Lynne Sharon Schwartz, who writes that she was “shaped...



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