

# Censorship and Stereotypes

DORE SCHARY

THE columns of *The Saturday Review of Literature* recently have been engaged in a round-robin approval of freedom of speech. Articles by John Haynes Holmes and John Mason Brown [*SRL*, Feb. 26, March 5] speak eloquently of freedom of speech while at the same time they indict what they believe to be an attack on this freedom by sensitive minority criticism.

Opinions rushed off in haste sometime make errors of omission. It is likely that this report will make some errors of its own despite the fact it is not written in haste. Whether Mr. Holmes's and Mr. Brown's opinions were written in haste or not, I do not know. I only know that they both have made errors of omission.

Both Mr. Holmes and Mr. Brown overlook serious factors in the situation they discuss. Furthermore, Mr. Holmes states a false rumor as fact, and Mr. Brown picks it up and repeats it as fact. This rumor concerns "Ivanhoe." The project has not been banned by any minority pressure group. There never was an attempt to ban this project by any minority pressure group. The facts are these: As head of production at RKO Studios in 1947, I purchased from Paramount the scenario prepared on this classic. Aeneas MacKenzie, the screen writer, backed with historical pamphlets attacking Sir Walter Scott for his squeamishness in not having Rebecca marry Ivanhoe, had changed the story to suit the concept that Ivanhoe should have jilted Rowena and gone away with Rebecca. There was good reasoning for this in Mr. MacKenzie's research, but we felt that the classic story should not be altered because audiences could not be told all the reasons that Mr. MacKenzie had made available to himself. So we went back to the original story and prepared the script for production. This picture was to be made in England in collaboration with J. Arthur Rank. RKO's participation with Mr. Rank in this venture collapsed at the time of the British tax decision, and since the picture was a costly venture, the board at RKO decided not to go ahead with the project. Whenever they feel they are justified in spending almost three million dollars for its production, they will probably produce it.

This is stated not as conclusive evidence that everything Mr. Holmes and

Mr. Brown related is spurious, but only that their comments concerning "Ivanhoe" are in error.

Concerning freedom of speech, one who believes in any kind of freedom must agree with part of what these gentlemen say; but they, too casually, forget what another Mr. Holmes once said in connection with freedom of speech. He pointed out that freedom of speech did not give one the right to yell "fire" in a crowded theatre.

Elements of good taste, plus the desire to curb too aggressive a showmanship, led the motion-picture industry to adopt its own code of censorship. This code is maintained while at the same time we work constantly to have it broadened to accommodate for the rising intellectual standards of our audiences. The motion-picture industry, which is a mass medium of entertainment, information, and reporting, has enormous responsibilities. Some of these responsibilities we have discharged well. Others we have neglected, but we always are trying in some degree to accept and service these neglected responsibilities.

The visual impact of the screen is so powerful and so vivid that, in the hands of irresponsible people, it can become dangerous. In the hands of those who respect it, it can accomplish wonders.

One of Hitler's first propaganda grabs was for the screen. He employed his pictures to great advantage. In a pattern set by history, he propagated his stereotypes and his lies. Pictures in books, periodicals, and news-

papers have fed us scores of visual concepts that, because of changing times, are no longer true. Motion pictures in the past were guilty of perpetuating those stereotypes, and if now they seek to destroy them—prove them to be misconceptions—is this lack of freedom or is this rather a desire to tell the truth? By protesting the use of a stereotype, are we inhibiting freedom of speech or is this rather a desire to tell the truth? When Mr. Brown concludes his article quoting, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," what truth is he talking about? Will the representation of Fagin in "Oliver Twist" do damage? Will some people accept Fagin as a true character? And, if they do, is this the truth? If some bigots are comforted, will this "truth" make them free? Truth in many instances is of comparative value. What might be truth to Gerald L. K. Smith might not be truth to the Jewish victim of a riot incited by Mr. Smith's "truth."

I HAVE not seen "Oliver Twist." I have seen photographs from the production which reveal Fagin in his full malevolence. He looks precisely like the Nazi portraits of the Jews that Hitler circulated all through the world. These portraits presently are being perpetuated by the Gerald L. K. Smiths who would quite willingly use Fagin's film portrait as their model. In a world still smoldering with the hates and falsehoods stirred up by the most serious anti-Semitic pogroms of all history, one has a right to question the judgment and the logic of bringing Fagin to the screen at this time. One certainly has the right to question the good sense of opening this film in Berlin, the former center of a political administration that caused the murders of some six million people.

Freedom of speech permits any of



us to state that the American soldier is a coward, a knave, and a beast. It becomes folly, and we can certainly question the good intentions of anyone who asserts that charge on the morning that our armies land on Anzio or Iwo Jima. Somewhere undoubtedly there was an American soldier who was a coward, a knave, and a beast, but a portrait of such a soldier at a time of war is a disservice, and moreover, probably could be construed to be inflammatory, if not treasonable.

We are still in a war—a war against prejudice and venal intolerance. During such a state of intellectual siege we owe some obligations to minority groups so that the opposing forces are not comforted. If we were living in a world in which all children and people were being carefully insulated from hate and prejudice, there would be no inherent danger in portraying a bad Jew or a villainous Negro or an evil Catholic.

Perhaps Mr. Holmes and Mr. Brown can protect their families from the imposition of prejudice that Fagin might bring. I feel almost certain that I can protect my three children. But, if there are others—such as the family nearby that slammed a door because they discovered we were Jews; or the people around the corner who protested that there were too many “niggers” working too close to them; or the people across the street who said they were in trouble because “the lousy Catholics” had taken over the country—then, certainly, we must weigh carefully the damage that can be done by “art” that unwittingly becomes propaganda for the bigot.

Certainly the Jew or the Negro or the Catholic must not be spared acknowledging his share of sin and error. But the Jew has been the main target of hate. Anti-Semitism in all its virulent aspects, economic, political, social, and religious, is not a sometime thing. It is a calculated program that continues under various auspices. It must be destroyed and forgotten as must all anti-minority hatreds. Part of that good fight includes the business of not aiding or comforting the enemy. The bigots can be comforted by “*Oliver Twist*” and its Fagin, because of the tremendous wallop of the image.

A successful motion picture is seen by perhaps thirty to forty million people all over the world within a period of some twelve to fifteen months. Any image that reaches that many people in so short a time can do harm or can do good, and do it fast and perhaps permanently. The risk of Fagin doing harm is a great risk. This is not a casual harm it can do, but a

real active harm in flaming up the fire that is being fought by every decent agency of information and communication in America.

The American prototype is that of a tall, thin, lithe-muscled man who can shoot straight, hit hard, is self-reliant and knows how to handle himself in any tough circumstances. Because of this flattering identification, we can well afford the criticism and occasional evil portrait of the American personality. If once the Negro stereotype becomes that best represented in the personality of Dr. Bunche, the Negro will be able to afford the luxury of less complimentary portraits. Once the Jewish stereotype becomes perhaps that of a Baruch, we, too, easily will be able to accommodate the representation of a Fagin.

“The Birth of a Nation,” mentioned by Mr. Holmes, was a great film. However, in view of the renewed activities of the Ku Klux Klan, a remake of this film could bring legitimate cause for alarm to the Negro minority.

When a war is over we forgive our conscientious objectors who are denied freedom of action and freedom of speech during the days of danger to the republic. When the war against bigotry is concluded, we can condone carelessness and lack of judgment; but, until that time, we have the right to defend ourselves against anything that might help lose that war.

*Dore Schary is Vice-President in charge of production at the studios of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. He was formerly a writer, director and producer.*

## On Dedications

*(This is written to whom it may not concern)*

A GOOD many years ago, when I was young and charming (Cf “H. M. S. Pinafore”) I read all dedications, long introductions, and prefaces to second editions. They seemed to me interminable. Usually they were dedicated to a patron, frequently some lord or other, who had given the author a few pounds.

So I dedicated books, too. To friends—Edna Ferber, Ring Lardner, and Montague Glass. What books? Out of print.

And, for no reason that I know, or ever knew, John O’Hara dedicated a book to me, and so did Dorothy Parker. What books? “Appointment in Samarra” and “Not So Deep as a Well.”

And this leads me to some books that I dedicated: One called “Over-set,” “To Herbert Bayard Swope, Without Whose Friendly Aid Every Line in this Book Was Written.” Mr. Swope at that happy time was my boss on *The World*, which newspaper died February 28, 1931.

About that time Mr. Francis Hackett wrote “The Invisible Censor.” It was written “To My Wife, Signe Toksvig, Whose Lack of Interest in this Book Has Been My Constant Desperation.” Onspired by this candor, I did a few mythical offerings, such as “To My Daughters, Spenda and Blow, But for Whose Extravagant Idleness I Should Not Have Had to Write this Unworthy Novel.”

Of course, my four children hadn’t been born when I wrote those fictitious dedications. I am now not particularly hard at work on another book, which I may dedicate “To Cer-

tain Schools and Colleges, in the Hope that the Royalties on this Book Will Be Enough to Defray What I Still Owe these Four Institutions.”

I actually did dedicate a book to my wife. It was “Half a Loaf,” (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1927), and it was consecrated “To Esther, Who Continually Urges Me to Write More—and More.” And in 1932, I dedicated “Christopher Columbus” (Viking, 1932) to

To Anthony and Timothy, my beautiful boys;  
To all my readers, Yids and Goys;  
To every critic, saint or crook;  
To anybody who buys this book;  
To everybody who wishes it success;  
Meaning me and The Viking Press.

I have some in reserve. Such as:

I hurl at you this lovely book;  
At your unbrainful head I shy it.  
For, oh you parsimonious crook,  
You’d never buy it.

And I wrote this, if I write another book, and if I feel as I do this spring afternoon:

Not any line, my love, nor letter  
Within this book but might be better.  
Yet were mine every written line  
Than man hath ever done more fine,  
Richer than man will ever do,  
Still would be too poor for You.

Some of these dedications might be litigious. But seriously, as the orator said who hadn’t made any change at all, I’d better dedicate my forthcoming book “To William Shakespeare, from whose Attorneys I Am Unlikely to Hear in the Morning.”

—FRANKLIN P. ADAMS.