

Diary

Cinderella as Role Model

LIKE MOST MOTHERS of small girls, I was eagerly made aware when Disney's *Cinderella* was "coming to home video." I was reminded over and over that it would be my "once in a lifetime chance" to purchase this "timeless classic." And of course I did, the very day it arrived in our local video store. I've since had the opportunity to view *Cinderella* maybe three hundred times. And again, like most mothers of small girls, each time I've hit the play button I've wondered: Should I be letting my daughter watch this stuff?

For of course Cinderella is the archetypical feminist villain — and maybe never so perfectly villainous as in the Disney animators' vision of her: shapely, winsome, dreamily unselfconscious that her hope to be rescued by a handsome prince will send a generation of feminist theorists into turgid condemnations of her. My daughter, too, is dreamily unselfconscious. She sighs as Cinderella waves farewell from the royal wedding coach (and sadly wonders afterwards what sort of "progress" replaced carriages with minivans and ballgowns with miniskirts). And I have to admit, as I watch Cinderella go about her chores good-naturedly, I'd rather my daughter absorbed her example than that of, say, the characters on "Sesame Street," who appear to regard trash recycling as the supreme human virtue.

I also prefer Cinderella to the con-

temporary, supposedly more "enlightened" Disney heroines — the Little Mermaid, Belle, and Pocahontas. For there is another side to Cinderella overlooked in the pursuit of edifying feminist role models. Despite her treacly moments, Cinderella displayed truly admirable traits: cheerfulness in adversity, pluckiness in standing up to her malevolent step-family, modesty, resourcefulness, and a determination to dream of a better life despite her seemingly hopeless situation. The traits that unite the current crop of Disney heroines are their colossal vanity and self-absorption — whether it's the tarty mermaid mouthing off to her father, or Belle sneering at the provincialism of her neighbors, or Pocahontas exclaiming that she'd rather go it alone than suffer the indignity of a "handsome, sturdy husband" building "sturdy walls" around her.

CINDERELLA, ON THE OTHER hand, was a heroine of the old school. These heroines didn't only populate Disney cartoons, of course. They were everywhere — played by actresses like Olivia de Havilland and Katharine Hepburn in the great Hollywood movies; or striding through, of all places, nineteenth-century novels. Is there a greater heroine in literature than Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett? Who could be more fierce-minded and independent than she? What modern-day female character is more determined not to be simpering or foolish, a mere object, nor to resign her fate to the hands of an unworthy man?

These sorts of heroines no longer exist because today popular heroines must also, by and large, accept the tenets of feminism. Independence and self-expression are to be prized to the exclusion of everything else; marriage is a state to fall into (if at all) as if by accident, and should never be any woman's overriding goal or ambition. The more cardboard feminist heroines remind me of the proletarian heroes of old Soviet

boy-meets-tractor novels: their personalities reflect a set of political ideas rather than real life conflicts and passions. Pocahontas' aspiration to perfect independence is as crudely stereotypical and idealized as Cinderella's rescue by a prince.

THE TRUE HEROINE did not shun romance or marriage, nor did she compromise herself in it: she chose her husband wisely and with the knowledge that the egotism of youth must eventually yield to the responsibilities of adulthood; she understood that those responsibilities, while compromising in superficial respects, were the substance of a full existence. Perhaps Cinderella is naive to dream of a happy, romantic ending with her prince; on the other hand — to paraphrase, badly, the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel — at least her glass-slipped feet are pointed in the right direction. Yes, of course, hers is an innocent view to take of marriage today. What about divorce, what about single motherhood, etc., etc.? Cinderella might also be hit by a runaway carriage; she might die in childbirth; she might be assassinated by anti-monarchist revolutionaries; Prince Charming might turn out to be Prince Charles. But at least she is expecting to get married, and at least she is — going into it — expecting a happy experience.

If my own little girl — who insists upon falling asleep at night wearing a pink Cinderella ribbon tied around her neck — grows up with the same optimism about marriage, I'll feel very gratified. I certainly don't worry about her independence. She is brave, clever, and good-hearted, but I'm afraid she identifies rather too strongly with the autocratic side of princesses: I sometimes wonder if she could do with a little less self-esteem. It is thus my daughter's future prince, whoever he may be, for whom I will save my sympathy.

- Danielle Crittenden

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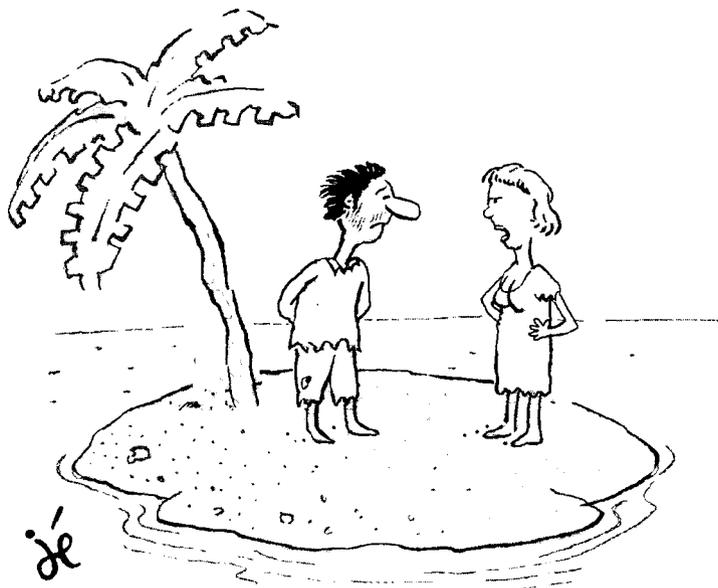
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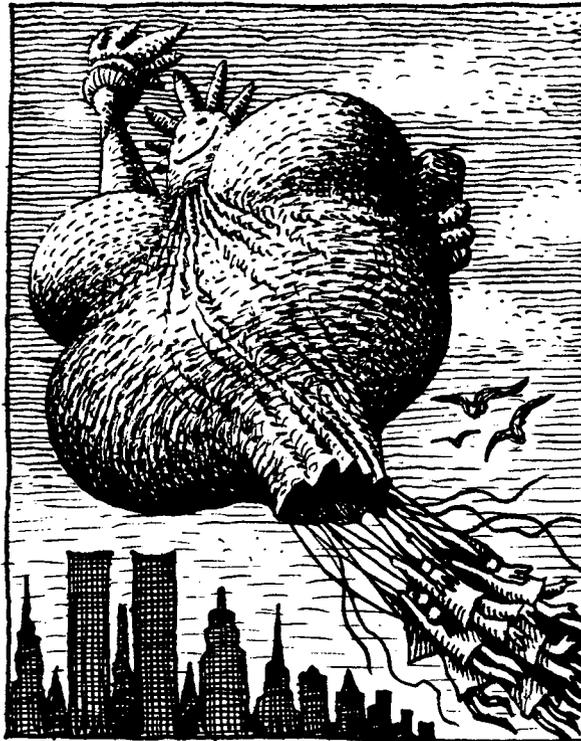
"Clichés! Clichés! That's all I ever hear from you!"

You're On Your Own, Baby

Midge Decter argues that the woman problem arises not from lack of freedom but because of it

WHEN SIGMUND FREUD first asked his now tiresomely famous question — What does woman want? — it is hard not to believe that there was a certain amount of unscientific irritation in it. But even Freud could not have dreamed that by the second half of the twentieth century, the whole of American society — its men and women, its thinkers, its journalists, its artists, its educators, its religious leaders, its entertainers, its doctors, its policy-makers and politicians, its Freudians and its anti-Freudians — would be agitated by the issue of how women feel, what they feel, and what is bothering them.

The first thing to be said is that however one defines that issue, the so-called women's movement has failed to speak to it. I say so-called because from the very first, feminist groups have neither concerned themselves with nor spoken for the vast majority of their constituency. We might linger for hours over the problem of how and why there should have been an explosion of angry demand on the part of women who as a group were the freest, healthiest, wealthiest, longest-lived, and most comfortably situated people the world had yet laid eyes upon. Let's just say that the world's most fortunate people —



among them, most visibly, educated young American women — were at some point mysteriously seized with a paroxysm of cosmic greed. However good it was, life was not good enough for them. Like the writer who, blessed with praise, adulation, best-sellerdom, and all the coveted prizes, yet grows bitter at not having been declared equal to Shakespeare, a certain sector of the American upper-middle class began to bray to the moon that it had not, like God, achieved perfection.

Having said all this, however, I hasten to point out that there is a troubling and difficult condition in the life of the contemporary American

woman. Or to put the matter more precisely, in the life of contemporary American men and women. For it is impossible, and should be impossible, to speak of one without the other. Life on earth is what men and women share together. They may have different interests, and they do; they may need to keep secrets from one another, and they do; they may in some sense be locked in combat, and they are. But the operative word here is locked. What touches one, profoundly affects the other. So women, and through them men, are suffering from — though are also blessed by — a certain new difficulty.

Modern enlightened woman has been caught in the toils of a truly revolutionary social change — and with her, her husband, sons, and lovers. The women's movement was itself no doubt a kind of secondary symptom of this new condition, a kind of momentary blip on the radar screen of modern woman's wanderings into uncharted territory. This revolution is the accession into her life of an entirely new degree of, and a new kind of, freedom. Indeed, she has become free in a way and to an extent that her husband has not.

It is a freedom that frightens her and disorients her and burdens her ter-