

The Normalization of Sara: An Inversion of Queerness in Filmed Versions of Burnett's A Little Princess

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A Little Princess (ALP)¹ is one of Frances Hodgson Burnett's most popular works. It is the riches-to rags-to riches story of a plucky orphan, Sara Crewe, and chronicles her adventures and misadventures at a boarding school run by the cold and cruel Miss Minchin. As she did with several of her other stories, Burnett reused and reworked the tale of Sara in a variety of formats and genres: a three-part short story "Sara Crewe or What Happened at Miss Minchin's," which appeared in *St. Nicholas Magazine* (December 1887 through January 1888); a novella of the same name (1888); a play, The Little Princess (1902); and a novel, A Little Princess: Being the Whole Story of Sara Crewe, Now Told for the First Time (1905) (Bixler "Chronology"). The character of Sara, the eponymous "Little Princess," has a powerful pull. To date, there have been three major film adaptations of ALP: a black-and-white silent film version starring Mary Pickford (1917); a Technicolor, musical version with Shirley Temple (1939); and a 1995 version directed by Alfonso Cuarón with Liesel Matthews (IMDB).

Sara's magnetism rests in her strength of character. In Burnett's text, she is an extraordinary child — contemplative, self-possessed, self-aware, intelligent, highly imaginative — and very much a child apart at Miss Minchin's. In the story, Sara's loss of fortune does not cause her "different-ness," it merely accentuates it. She is different by nature, or (as Burnett repeatedly describes her) "queer." Becky, the scullery maid, is another child apart at Miss Minchin's. While Becky is queered by her class and poverty, she is by her nature a little girl much like the other little girls at the school. In the stage version, Burnett emphasizes this point during an exchange between Sara and Minchin. Becky enters carrying presents for Sara's birthday party. When Minchin orders Becky away, Sara asks that she stay: "She's a little girl, too, you know." Minchin replies in amazement: "My dear Sara, Becky is the scullery-maid. Scullery-maids are not little girls — at least they ought not to be." After Sara retorts: "But Becky is, you know," Miss Minchin delivers the punch line: "I'm sorry to hear it" (10). Thus, while Becky and Sara are both "other-ed" at Miss Minchin's, Sara's queerness is permanent and character-bound while Becky's is a socio-economic happenstance. Sara herself is cognizant of the vagaries of fate with regard to money and status. Upon first meeting Becky in the 1905 novel she states: "I am only a little girl like you. It's just an accident that I am not you, and you are not me" (30).

Becky does not appear in the serialization or the novella. She makes her debut in the 1902 play wherein she functions, in part, as a conduit for the audience to share in Sara's rich interior life (narrated in the print versions of ALP). In the 1905 novel, Becky's role expands. She is Sara's "other." Becky's lack of imagination and intellectual gifts contrasts sharply with Sara's abilities. Along with the schoolgirls, Lottie and Ermengarde,

¹ A Little Princess alternates in print and film titles between "A" and "The." For the purpose of simplicity all works will be referred to as A Little Princess (ALP).

and the little street girl, Anne, she plays “populace” to Sara's “princess” — a recipient of her “largesse.”

Burnett's Sara is a gifted, resilient little girl, markedly different in looks and demeanor from her peers — a heroine ahead of her time. She pushes Victorian/Edwardian boundaries of how girls should look, think, and act. In my opinion, however, over the past ninety years Sara has been lost in translation from text to film. She has been unqueered and recast in the image of the Romantic child. Conversely, Becky, as “not-Sara,” has become increasingly queered. In this paper, I will examine this inversion of queerness, from Sara to Becky, in ALP films and discuss how it reflects the Romantic paradigm of childhood, especially girlhood, in American popular culture.

In order to assess this shift in the characterizations of Sara and Becky accurately, one must first begin with Burnett's original text. For the purpose of analysis, the 1905 novel will be used. Just as Dickens warns his readers at the start of A Christmas Carol (1843) that the key to understanding the story is the fact that Marley is dead, Burnett alerts her readers that the subject of this tale is a child special and different. Starting from page one, Burnett describes Sara as “queer” and subsequently uses the term in regard to her over two dozen times. Burnett's repetition of this term underscores the notion that Sara is non-normative. Since this is a primary premise of the text, it is important to understand the standard that she is queered against, that of the innocent, Romantic child. In his A History of Childhood, Colin Heywood states that association of childhood with innocence became deeply embedded in Western Culture, particularly after the Romantics “made their mark in the nineteenth century” (34). Art historian Anne Higonnet, describes the Romantic child as “sweetly, sunny, innocently cute” (28). She notes that images, such as Reynolds's The Age of Innocence, visually codify Rousseau's principles of the natural

child (Figure 1), i.e., a child innocent of, and removed from,



Age of Innocence by Sir Joshua Reynolds
Image in public domain through Project Gutenberg
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/29532/29532-h/29532-h.htm>

adult worries and cares. The subject of the painting is painted in “soft peaches and cream;” the skin is chubby and dimpled; the child is white, well-cared-for, and well-to-do (15). Higonnet notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, due to new technologies, inexpensive reproductions of Romantic paintings were widely available and wildly popular, most particularly, Gainsborough's Blue Boy (1770). According to Higonnet, it was the “single most popular image of childhood” (46). “Blue Boy” suits for boys were all the rage with Victorian mothers, including Burnett herself. Burnett famously sent a photo of her son, Vivian, dressed in a black-velvet Blue Boy suit to illustrator Reginald Birch, and suggested he use it as the look for the title character in her work, Little Lord

Fauntleroy (Gerzina 110). The Lord Fauntleroy version of the Blue Boy suit became a fad among middle-class American mothers which lasted well into the 1920s (Picken 136). By the time she wrote “Sara Crewe,” Burnett was a well-established and influential author. Indeed with Little Lord Fauntleroy, Burnett and Birch contributed to the visual vocabulary of Victorian childhood in popular culture. While, Cedric (young Fauntleroy), like Sara, is “queer” and “old fashioned,” intelligent and grave, he fit the popular image of the Romantic child with golden curls, and a “lithe, graceful, little body and a manly little face” (Burnett Fauntleroy 9). How then did her next literary creation, Sara Crewe, break the mold?

Physically, Sara is very different from both Lord Fauntleroy and the peaches-and-cream dimpled subject of Age of Innocence. After Miss Minchin refers to her as a “beautiful” child at their first meeting, Sara has the following interior dialogue:

I am not beautiful at all. Colonel Grange's little girl, Isobel, is beautiful. She has dimples and rose-colored cheeks, and long hair the color of gold. I have short black hair and green eyes; besides which, I am a thin child and not fair in the least. I am one of the ugliest children I ever saw. (8)

Burnett quickly qualifies Sara's self-assessment. She writes that while Sara does indeed look nothing like the aforementioned Isobel:

...she had an odd charm of her own...Her hair was heavy and quite black...her eyes were greenish gray, it is true, but they were big, wonderful eyes with long, black lashes, and though she herself did not like the color of them, many other people did. (8)

It is interesting to note that the above description of Sara resembles the young Burnett, herself. Indeed, Bixler states that Burnett draws on her own “childhood memoir” for the character of Sara (88). Burnett, like Sara, was an immigrant, who, after her father's death, went from a “sheltered” and “prosperous” existence to an “almost penniless dependence on an American uncle” (Bixler 1). As a young woman, Burnett even opened her own “Select Seminary” which failed. Like Sara, it was Burnett's imagination (as expressed through her writing) that ultimately brought about the restoration of her financial security (Bixler 3). Thus Sara, like her creator, is very different from the idealized Romantic child: neither is stereotypically beautiful and neither enjoys the shelter of a paternally protected childhood, free from the worries of the adult world. Sara must use all of her powers and gifts to fend for herself, and also for Becky, with whom she is entwined in friendship and fortune.

When we turn to ALP in film, what is immediately apparent in all three versions is a shift in the portrayal of Sara, both visually and in characterization. The un-queering

of Sara begins with the silent movie, starring Mary Pickford.² Indeed, Pickford's film portrayal is Ur-Sara from which both Temple and Matthews draw. Pickford, "America's Sweetheart," built a highly successful career by playing the "spunky" heroine who "becomes a beauty, finds a good man's love, and rests secure" (Whitfield 153). The Little Princess was one of six movies starring Pickford (who was then twenty-five) released in 1917 (Figure 2). Pickford biographer, Eileen Whitfield, states that with the character of Gwendolyn in Poor Little Rich Girl (1917), Pickford and screenwriter Frances Marion (her friend and frequent collaborator), added a "new note" to the Pickford movie persona: "Instead of appearing as a childlike woman" as in her previous films "she appeared as a child, pure and simple" (Whitfield 153). According to Whitfield, Mary Pickford's movie-going public was steeped in a Victorian/Edwardian sentimentality regarding childhood which "explains in part, the lingering taste of silent viewers for actresses who were physically childlike." These included performers such as Pickford and the Gish sisters (Whitfield 153).

Pickford plays Sara as the ultimate Romantic child. Visually, she is diminutive, fair, beautifully dressed, and adorned with long, golden curls. Pickford's Sara is a mischievous, sunny charmer who wins the interest, protection, and affection of the curmudgeonly old Mr. Carrisford (her father's lost business partner) who lives next door. ALP 1917 was based on Burnett's 1902 play. While the storyline of the film does not much differ from the play, it does present a radically different version of Sara. Pickford's Sara behaves in ways totally at odds with Burnett's grave, old-fashioned, and queer little girl. Pickford pouts and stomps. She makes Becky (ZaSu Pitts) the butt of slapstick humor. In the birthday party scene, Pickford's Sara sweetly twirls around atop a table as the Miss Minchin girls frolic and dance around her adoringly.

² At the time of this writing, The Little Princess (1917) is not available on the Web. To familiarize oneself with Mary Pickford, the reader can download Cinderella (1914) at The Internet Archive, <http://www.archive.org/details/Cinderella1914MaryPickford>



Figure 2. Mary Pickford (right) and ZaSu Pitts (left) in The Little Princess (1917)
Image in the public domain available through Wikiedia Commons
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ZaSu_Pitts-Mary_Pickford.png

Whitfield notes that Pickford, in addition to being a talented actress, was a savvy business woman with great “financial acumen” (3). She delivered what her audience wanted to see, successfully tapping into “popular filmgoing taste for two decades” (Whitfield 3). Whitfield contends that Pickford was very aware of the Victorian (Romantic) sensibility of her public with regard to the sentimentalization of childhood and images of children (153). According to Higonnet, popular images of Romantic childhood include five themes that “artists of all abilities” use: child as miniature adult; child as angel or cupid; child with pet; and dress-up fun (Higonnet 36). Pickford, who had a great deal of artistic control in her pictures, used many of these elements in her version of ALP: Sara is alternately elegantly and nostalgically costumed (Rich Sara has Art Deco frocks and a Poor Sara has Cinderella-like dresses); she is surrounded by animals (dogs, ponies, and Ram Dass's monkey); large-scale furniture is used in this, as in other Pickford films, to make her seem even smaller (Whitfield 154). Indeed Whitfield writes that in her soft-focused, demurely-attired publicity still she is “often posed with kittens, puppies, or a birdcage” (153). If Pickford's Sara was quintessentially Romantic and normative, what of ZaSu Pitts as Becky?

ZaSu Pitts was twenty-three when she played Becky, her first major screen role. Pitts was tall, thin, with dark hair. “Her eyes were enormous in a small pinched face,” (Whitfield 168) a physical description which harkens back to Burnett's Sara. Pitts, a gifted comedienne, played Becky for laughs: e.g., although Sara's loyal friend, she grimaces and rolls her eyes as Sara takes off on verbal flights of fancy; and when Sara tells Becky that dolls come alive when no one is about, Becky responds: “Pardon me, Miss, but was you dropped on your head as a baby?” (ALP 1917). In the film's final

scene, Becky and Sara are safely ensconced at Mr. Carrisford's. Beautifully dressed, they share Christmas presents with neighborhood poor children. Sara opens a Jack-in-the Box; Becky does a pratfall; there is a close up of Pickford laughing sweetly; and a fade to black.

The audiences loved it and ALP was a hit. Photoplay Journal declared: “Only an extremist in pessimism could avoid being captivated by this charming characterization” (“A Little Princess”). Pickford's film, well-loved and financially successful in its time, seems to serve as the template for subsequent characterizations of Sara and Becky. Sara is pretty, slightly mischievous, and sweet; Becky is funny and quirky. Thus the inversion of queerness with Sara and Becky had begun.

In 1939, Shirley Temple became the next film Sara Crewe.³ Visually, Temple as Sara is remarkably Pickford-esque (Figure 3). Indeed, throughout her career Shirley Temple continued the film iconography of the Romantic Child forged by Pickford. Temple was frequently compared to Pickford and she re-created many of Pickford's roles (Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, Sara Crewe, Gwendolyn of Poor Little Rich Girl, and an updated version of Pickford's Daddy-Long-Legs, Curly Top) (Whitfield 300). The primary difference between Temple and Pickford was that Temple was an actual child playing child roles, and Pickford was an adult interpreting childhood. While Temple emulated the Pickford look and the sunny, child persona, critics noted that Pickford's portrayals were more complicated: “informed by temper, violence, tragedy,” slapstick humor, and “street sense” (Whitfield 300).

While constructed on the 1917 ALP template, the Temple version takes greater liberties with Burnett's story. New characters are introduced (Arthur Treacher appears as

³ The Little Princess (1939) is available through the Internet Archive http://www.archive.org/details/little_princess



Figure 3. Shirley Temple in The Little Princess (1939)

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http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shirley_Temple_in_The_Little_Princess.jpg

Miss Minchin's ex-vaudevillian brother, Bertie); song-and-dance numbers are added; a love-story sub-plot is tacked-on; Queen Victoria makes an appearance; the military action is switched from India to South Africa; and in the film's finale Captain Crewe, discovered to be wounded, not dead, is ultimately reunited with Sara. With regard to the characterization of Sara however, I would argue that the films are remarkably and purposefully the same. Pickford, a generation earlier had established a successful formula for images of childhood in films. She created an archetype of American girlhood that audiences clamored to see. By 1939, Temple's career had begun to sputter. America's Little Princess was approaching adolescence; she was getting taller, her voice was deepening, and her golden curls were turning brown. Producer Daryl Zanuk turned to big-budget classics like ALP to rekindle the Temple magic (Windeler 203). While ALP was critically acclaimed for its production values and for Temple's film portrayal, it was out-performed at the box office by MGM's The Wizard of Oz starring Judy Garland.

While the 1939 version toned down the mischievousness and slapstick sensibilities of the silent film, it accentuated the main character's sunny-ness and sweetness. In a long dream sequence Temple/Sara appears as a fairy princess, who dances and sings, brings together the young lovers, and vanquishes a wicked witch. While there is dramatic tension in the final frantic scene with Sara searching for her father in the soldiers hospital, neither the 1939 nor the 1917 version adequately portrays

Sara's poverty, loneliness, or the abuse she endures. Neither Temple nor Pickford manages to convey Sara's intense intelligence or her inner-struggles for self-control.

As did ZaSu Pitts in 1917, Sybil Jason serves as comic relief in the Temple version. With her Cockney accent and multiple bursts of "Lor' Miss!" Jason/Becky is more of a caricature than fully-developed character. But, again as with Pitts, Sybil Jason had some of the film's best lines. Shirley Temple writes in her autobiography that she was extremely jealous of the comic aspects of Jason's role. In a rage, she overdid the ash-dumping scene with Lavinia (Marcia Mae Jones) to let out some of her anger and frustration (Temple 255). As in the Pickford film, Sybil Jason's Becky is queerer than Sara: visually more interesting (dark and smudgy), more fun, and more compelling on-screen than the overly-Romanticized Sara. Even in poverty, Temple's Sara enjoys some remnants of an innocent, protected childhood. She has adults who take an interest in her (Ram Dass, Miss Rose, Bertie Minchin, even Queen Victoria) and she is restored to paternal protection at the movie's end. The audience does not know what fate befalls Becky. When last seen, she is in the hands of Miss Minchin who intends to turn her over to the police. Queer indeed.

The most recent ALP, a 1995 version directed by Alfonso Cuarón, is a beautiful production nominated for two Academy Awards (Best Art Direction and Best Cinematography) (IMDB). This version borrows heavily from the 1939 ALP. Again there are several major changes from the original Burnett story: the timeframe is shifted to the 1910s; Miss Minchin's Seminary moves to New York; Captain Crewe is serving in World War I Europe; he is again resurrected for a happy ending; but most significantly for this analysis, Becky is now African American. Sara, as portrayed by Liesel Matthews, is a beautiful, sunny, fair-haired, fair-skinned child. While she is not as mischievous as Pickford, she does frighten Lavinia (the mean girl at the school) with an evil spell. She does not pout or sing and dance like Temple and unlike Temple and Pickford, she does not appear in her own dream sequences. In fact, other than the scene in which she performs an action-hero-like feat of crossing a plank placed several stories high in order to escape from Miss Minchin, she is fairly bland. As with Pickford and Temple, her poverty, loneliness, and abuse are neither palpable nor compelling. Her attic room at Miss Minchin's is elegantly sparse and lit with enormous windows. It resembles more an expensive New York loft apartment rather than a rat's nest of claustrophobic squalor. Matthews as Sara never seems to be in true want or despair. While Vanessa Lee Chester as Becky is a charming child actor, she is not given much material to work with other than one scene in which she saves the other girls by distracting Miss Minchin with a scream. Both actors, Matthews and Chester, are visually appealing and exude the innocence of character that American audiences have come to expect in depictions of girlhood in family films. However, the visual impact and historical implications of Becky as an African American challenge the viewer's sensibilities of Romantic childhood and the Romantic child-heroine. The portrayal of Becky, as a racialized "other" is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Cuarón's interpretation.

In Western culture, there is a long tradition of race as a signifier of "other-ness." Scholars such as Reimer and Kawabata have examined Ram Dass and Mr. Carrisford, the

Indian Gentleman, as racially “other-ed” characters to explore issues such as social developmentalism and colonialism in ALP. I believe that Cuarón uses the racialization of Becky to emphasize the egalitarian message of his film: all little girls, even the most “other-ed” are important and should be loved. Simply put, all little girls are princesses. Like the 1917 Becky, the 1995 Becky is rescued by Sara but until that rescue is realized, she is the ultimate queer child: non-white, poor, and unprotected. Thus, by the end of the century, Sara has been totally divested of her queer-ness which has been transferred to Becky.

The Sara of Frances Hodgson Burnett, most fully realized at the beginning of the twentieth century, is a very different Little Princess than that of century's end. In a feminist reading of Burnett's ALP, Elizabeth Rose Gruner calls Sara a dynamically adaptable heroine whose chief function is to “spur the imagination of another generation of readers” (180). Gruner states that Text Sara is no “passive, weepy heroine;” indeed she “positively revises the Cinderella model...through her speech, specifically her ability to tell stories” (180). However, Kirkland in her analysis of ALP in film, is troubled by how Film Sara differs from Text Sara in “disturbing ways” (191). She concludes that Sara in film presents contemporary girls with a “diluted” role model (201).

I concur that the film transformation of Sara is troubling. In the nearly one-hundred year history of Sara on film, Burnett's heroine has become increasingly bland and decreasingly subversive. Kirkland writes: “Let us earnestly hope that a future filmmaker will produce a Sara Crewe who is faithful to Burnett's own strong conception of her” (202). The first ALP, although firmly rooted in the traditions of the Romantic childhood, was adapted by a woman (Frances Marion) and produced by a woman (Mary Pickford) in an era when few women held positions of power. Almost a hundred years later, as the film industry becomes more queered with the “other-ed” voices of women and minorities, perhaps the next treatment of Sara will more closely resemble the odd little girl of the book.

It is interesting to note the evolution of the title of the story of Sara Crewe. Originally, in the serialized short story and the novella, the work bore the name of Sara herself. When Burnett reworked the story as a play she titled it: A Little Un-fairy Princess which served as its name when it opened in London. When the play began production for its New York premier, it was suggested to Burnett that she change it to “the more commonplace Little Princess” (Burnett 303). Fans of Text Sara can hope that one day her “Un-ness” will one day be restored to her in film.

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