



FIGURE 4. Pickford studio portrait for *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (dir. Maurice Tourneur, 1917). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

## Oh, “Doll Divine”

*Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze*

Mary Pickford, doll divine,  
Year by year, and every day  
At the moving-picture play,  
You have been my valentine.

—Vachel Lindsay, “To Mary Pickford, Moving-Picture Actress”

Mary Pickford was, arguably, the most famous woman of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Inarguably, she was one of the first major stars of the Hollywood film industry and one of the very few—female or male—able to sustain stardom for more than twenty years. Born Gladys Smith in Toronto, Canada, Mary Pickford became a stage actress at age six (published age “5”). She first appeared in motion pictures in one-reelers of American Biograph in the spring of 1909. In the 1910s the actress known as “Our Little Mary” quickly cemented her popularity through numerous films that coincided with the industry’s shift to Hollywood and using the actor as a personality for drawing audiences to the box-office.<sup>1</sup> Pickford was promoted as “America’s Sweetheart,” “The World’s Sweetheart,” and, as poet Vachel Lindsay dubbed her, “The Queen of the Movies.”<sup>2</sup> Her films for Famous Players in the late 1910s regularly netted more than a million dollars a year. In 1918 an article in *American Magazine* proclaimed what by then was obvious: “Our Little Mary” had become “the most popular motion picture actress in the world.”<sup>3</sup>

What made her so popular? What exactly was the appeal of Mary Pickford and of her films? In attempting to answer these questions, it cannot escape notice that from the beginning of Pickford’s film career, the actress’s characters often are ambiguously inscribed with characteristics of both child and adult woman, as a child-woman.<sup>4</sup> As I will show, even when she ostensibly is cast as an adult, the grown-up Mary Pickford registers as an adolescent girl or a “child-woman,” ambigu-

ously poised between childhood and womanhood. As her career moved into the feature-film era, her screen persona grew even younger, until she was, for all intents and purposes, a child impersonator.

In 1914 an industry trade magazine, *The Bioscope*, published a review of the Pickford star vehicle *Tess of the Storm Country* (dir. Edwin S. Porter) that articulates one view of the actress's youthful appeal: "There are many young comediennes . . . but it is only Mary Pickford . . . who can create through the silent medium . . . just that particular kind of sentiment—ineffably sweet, joyously young, and sometimes, if one may put it so, almost unbearably heartbreaking in its tender pathos—which has become identified with her name, and with which we are all familiar."<sup>5</sup>

In *Tess* (as well as in its 1922 remake) Pickford was cast as an adolescent hoyden living in poverty. Many of the actress's other star vehicles, including *Rags* (dir. James Kirkwood, 1915) and *M'Liss* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1918), followed the same formula, placing the girl in a small town or the country. A *Variety* reviewer of *Rags* thought that the basis of Pickford's popular appeal was already rather obvious: "she and her bag of tricks are so well established . . . [that] no matter what she does in a picture they [film followers] are sure to term it 'cute,' and in the current offering are many scenes that call for that expression."<sup>6</sup> Pickford regularly played "cute" girls who, in the emerging language of the time, fell into the category known as "adolescents."<sup>7</sup> In the late 1910s, however, her characters began to grow even younger. She became a child impersonator in *The Foundling* (dir. John O'Brien, 1916), *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (dir. Maurice Tourneur, 1917), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1917), and *The Little Princess* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1917). Audiences and critics responded with enthusiasm. She spawned imitators, like Mary Miles Minter, and wrote for *Vanity Fair* about the techniques and technical problems of undertaking child roles.<sup>8</sup>

The numerous textual iterations of the childlike "Mary Pickford" enabled her remarkable success. The model of young white femininity Pickford represented, sometimes fragile and imperiled, sometimes feisty and resilient, was not the only type available to audiences in the 1910s. In those same years Fox star Theda Bara was the most famous embodiment of the seductive power of the dark, orientalized vamp; and Pearl White and Grace Cunard exemplified the thrilling athleticism of the serial heroine who turned physical danger into high adventure.<sup>9</sup> Yet none of these stars achieved the sustained popularity of Pickford.

In searching for an explanation of Pickford's juvenation, one might be tempted to assume that it reflected the predictable typecasting of



FIGURE 5. Pickford as the mining camp hoyden in *Rags* (dir. James Kirkwood, 1915). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

a popular actress by an exploitative, male-dominated industry. Such a view has to be tempered by the knowledge that, by the late 1910s, the actress was already exercising a great deal of influence over her film projects made through the Artcraft division of Famous Players–Lasky. She briefly moved to First National, where she enjoyed more control as her own independent producer. As one of the founders of United Artists in 1919, she was in the forefront of film artists who exercised absolute creative mastery over their vehicles, from concept through distribution.

In spite of Pickford's unprecedented control over her films, the formula for her star vehicles changed relatively little. In fact, not only did she continue to play ragged adolescents, but also during the years in which she exercised the most creative authority over her silent film career, many of her most important and popular films present her in the role of a child. These included, at First National, *Daddy-Long-Legs* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1919) and, at United Artists, *Pollyanna* (dir. Paul Powell, 1920), *Through the Back Door* (dir. Alfred E. Green and Jack Pickford, 1921), *Little Lord Fauntleroy* (dir. Alfred E. Green and Jack

Pickford, 1921), *Little Annie Rooney* (dir. William Beaudine, 1925), and *Sparrows* (dir. William Beaudine, 1926). A commentator reacted to Pickford in *Through the Back Door*: “She stands absolutely alone in the portrayal of youthful roles, and conveys the impression of extreme youth, both through face and conduct as no other player ever has. . . . She appears with equal facility and conviction a child of eleven and a girl of seventeen.”<sup>10</sup>

The notion of a grown woman playing a child and the specific techniques used to represent “Our Little Mary” on- and offscreen certainly raise a host of questions about the fascination that Mary Pickford inspired in a broad range of viewers. In spite of her enormous popularity Pickford’s sustained association with child roles did not go without comment. “Why do people love Mary?” was a question often raised in the 1910s, but Mordaunt Hall’s review of *Pollyanna* in the *New York Times* articulates the rather more nervous question that was asked especially often in the 1920s: “People have been asking recently *why doesn’t Mary Pickford grow up?* The question is answered at the Rivoli this week. It is evident that Miss Pickford doesn’t grow up because she can make people laugh and cry, can win her way into more hearts and even protesting heads, as a rampant, resilient little girl than as anything else. She can no more grow up than Peter Pan.”<sup>11</sup>

The public strongly associated Pickford with child and “girl” characters, so much so that the actress was said to be expressing ambivalence toward her typecasting in juvenated roles as early as 1917; in 1921 she protested: “The world wants me to remain a little girl all my life. . . . I want to give the very best that is in me, but whenever I try to do something different, the public complains I have tucked up my curls and let off the short pinafores. To them, I am eternal youth, and they won’t let me grow up.”<sup>12</sup>

If juvenation of her onscreen image frustrated the actress’s desire to widen her range, it did not become the basis of any sustained effort to remake her screen persona. Pickford did attempt a departure in Frances Marion’s *The Love Light* (dir. Marion, 1921), a World War I melodrama. Cast as an Italian peasant, Pickford starts out as a village hoyden but quickly grows up when she falls in love with and marries a stranded sailor (Fred Thomson). He turns out to be a German spy. The film called for Angela, Pickford’s much-suffering protagonist, to temporarily lose her mind. Pickford immediately reverted back to type in her next film, *Through the Back Door*, in which she plays a child abandoned by her socialite mother to be raised by Belgian peasants. She



FIGURE 6. Ernst Lubitsch, director of *Rosita*, with Mrs. Charlotte Pickford and Mary Pickford, ca. 1923. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

did attempt dual roles, of mother and curly-headed son, in *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, also released in 1921.

Pickford's most famous departures from "type" came in two historical costume dramas. In 1923 the star sought to play Marguerite in an Ernst Lubitsch-directed version of *Faust*, but her mother objected to her daughter playing a woman who commits infanticide.<sup>13</sup> Instead, Pickford assumed the role of a coquettish young street dancer who catches the eye of a Spanish king in *Rosita* (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1923). The next year, Pickford starred in Marshall Neilan's *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1924), in which she played another coquettish adolescent, one who rebels against the dictates of her father to follow her heart.

The career stretch the actress attempted in these two star vehicles may appear to be a very conservative one. A thoughtful commentary in the *New York Evening Post* concluded that both *Dorothy Vernon* and *Rosita* offered only inconsequential differences from Pickford's usual screen work: "Our Mary herself is better and prettier than ever before. But for some unknown reason, she seems to insist on sticking to a type. . . . This, of course, tends to monotony. We believe that this is recognized by Miss

Pickford, and probably gives her many uneasy moments. . . . However, it isn't exactly fair to criticize Miss Pickford for her lack of versatility. She has so firmly established herself in the affection of a large army of movie fans that, perhaps, there would be disappointment if Mary turned out in some picture to be anyone else than Mary."<sup>14</sup>

Most critics were quite positive about Pickford's performances in productions that were more sexually sophisticated than her usual vehicles. Both films made money. Pickford, however, regarded *Rosita* and *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* as failures. Perhaps their lack of resounding box-office success worried the star that she would inevitably lose some measure of her popularity if she were not "Little Mary" in her pictures. Shortly after *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* was released, Pickford warned her fans that she might be forced to take radical action: "I created a certain type, which has been worked out now. It is finished. It is possible to do another type, of course, but the public wants me only in one character, that of Mary Pickford. Now I have finished that and I think it is time to quit."<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to her published remarks, Pickford didn't quit, and she did not quit her little girl roles. In a letter to a family member she blamed others for her return to type: "Everyone seemed to resent so much the two grown up parts of Rosita and Dorothy that I felt I had to return to a little girl role."<sup>16</sup> Did her loyal public constitute "everyone"? If so, how did the public articulate this resentment if not at the box office? We do not have access to evidence (such as troves of angry fan letters) that might support Pickford's claim, but in a letter to *Photoplay*, in 1925, a female fan emphasizes the powerful conflation of Pickford with her child characters that no doubt influenced the star's decision to stay true to her juvenated type:

My Dear Little Mary:

The idea that you are "just a little girl" is so firmly established in my mind that any attempt to discard it is resented. . . . Only a great actress or one who is really a child at heart, could make those little characters so natural that they become our friends, and we refuse to give them up when another "Mary Pickford" appears in the role of an older girl. We love Dorothy Vernon, too, but we never, never associate her with our own little Mary, Rebecca, and Pollyanna.<sup>17</sup>

To the letter writer "Little Mary" is yet another little girl among her favorite Pickford characters. A virtual collapse had occurred between "Our Little Mary" onscreen and "Mary Pickford" the actress.



FIGURE 7. Annie (Mary Pickford) leads her gang in *Little Annie Rooney* (dir. William Beaudine, 1925). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

In the same issue in which this letter appeared, *Photoplay* published a poll listing the roles that its readers wanted Pickford to play. The magazine claimed, “Almost twenty thousand readers spoke with a clear majority that was overwhelmingly in favor of roles [for Pickford] depicting childhood.”<sup>18</sup> We do not know the age of those who responded or if the majority were girls and women, but their top choices seem to indicate a familiarity with girls’ literature. Readers wanted Pickford to play Anne of Green Gables, Heidi, Alice in Wonderland, Cinderella, the Little Colonel, and Sara Crewe. As if in capitulation to the tastes of her fans, Pickford was back on the screen in the next year as a feisty Irish American tenement girl leading a multiracial neighborhood gang in *Little Annie Rooney* (dir. William Beaudine, 1925). Mordaunt Hall’s review was appreciative but aware of the intractability of the Pickford screen persona: “Viewing Miss Pickford in such a role is like turning the clock back as this charming actress has not changed perceptibly since the early days of pictures.”<sup>19</sup>



MARY'S MASQUERADE AND  
GENDERED SPECTATORSHIP

Mary Pickford engaged in a masquerade of childishness with significant implications for gender-determined spectatorship. Pickford's juvenation, I will argue, complicated the erotic and identificatory responses of gendered spectators in reaction to femininity embodied by an adult star. Pickford's child-woman characters function as an object of identification but also of desire—whether as an object of the spectator's desire or of other characters. The spectator must negotiate the subtleties of a complex masquerade in which an adult star who represents feminine aesthetic perfection also embodies a girl whose juvenated qualities suggest that she is too young to know what desire is. This notion of a masquerade of childishness bears some structural similarities to the masquerade of femininity often cited in feminist film theory. The latter is derived from Joan Riviere's psychoanalytically based theory of womanliness. In her 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" Riviere offers a psychoanalytic case history and argues that the cultural codes of womanliness or femininity are assumed rather like a masquerade to allay anxiety and deflect patriarchal criticism of the woman patient's demonstration of masculine traits such as intellectual prowess.<sup>20</sup>

Pickford's adult masquerade of childishness makes acceptable, perhaps even inevitable, the sexualization of her child-woman. Rather than performing the cultural codes expected to construct womanliness, Pickford assumed the signs of childishness. Pickford was diminutive (slightly over five feet tall), but her height alone does not explain why she so successfully embodied the child-woman. Many female stars in this era were petite; the movie industry believed that the camera was unflattering to taller women who also might look overwhelming beside many leading men.<sup>21</sup>

Although she often portrayed girls who were strong-minded and vigorous rather than silly and delicate, Pickford's masquerade of childishness undercut her potential to be a sexual subject. That masquerade of childishness reflects a nostalgia-driven, Victorian-influenced cultural determination of femininity. Pickford's films were often drawn from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature about children but not necessarily addressed only to them. Adults frequently read this literature. Many of the novels and plays adapted by Pickford to film were by women writers who offered the adventures and triumphs of independent little white girls whose behavior rebelled against expected norms of feminine refinement.<sup>22</sup> Although largely adhering to expectations for

the development of rambunctious girls into refined women, sometimes this literature was critical of gender inequalities. The inscription of the girl's immaturity and her transition to adulthood gave her "permission to behave in ways that might not be appropriate for a woman."<sup>23</sup>

Certainly all this is true of Pickford's title character in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, adapted from the book by Kate Douglas Wiggin. The mother of the title character cannot afford to raise her daughter, so she ships Rebecca off to live with two dour aunts. Rebecca demonstrates remarkable independence and intelligence as she adapts to living with them. She is a tomboy who climbs trees, uses an umbrella like a sword against a bothersome girl, and assertively manages other children in a backyard circus performance. Her antics invariably get her into trouble at school, at home, and at play.

In spite of qualities that might also suggest a nascent "New Woman," Rebecca/Pickford is brought to the brink of a virtuous womanhood by two familiar aspects of the Victorian model of femininity—altruism and illness.<sup>24</sup> It is of some interest, nevertheless, that her actual transition to a traditional model of white womanhood—one in which demure sweetness will replace brazen outspokenness—is never shown by the film. After recovering from her illness, Rebecca is shipped off again—to boarding school. She returns visually transformed, a beautiful young woman (of seventeen) ready to forgive her dying Aunt Miranda (Josephine Crowell) for her occasionally harsh treatment of her. But her character retains enough spontaneity (or rebelliousness) to run away when a neighbor, Adam Ladd (Eugene O'Brien), coded throughout the film as Rebecca's future husband, attempts to kiss her.

To theorize the complexities of gendered spectatorship in relation to Pickford's construction of childishness in a film like *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* requires an acknowledgment of the star's actual historical audiences in the period of her greatest popularity. United Artist press books gave exhibitors of Pickford's films advice for movie exploitation, including contests and tie-ins, event ideas for community organizations ("Humanizing the Campaign"), and articles for local newspaper publication.<sup>25</sup> These all suggest that in the 1920s, children were regarded as a very important segment of Pickford's historical audience, but women were also identified as a key part of the star's fan base. A review of *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* noted, "It's a safe bet that women of every age . . . will crowd the Criterion Theatre for months to come and many a man will also find himself sharing the joy of the powder-puff brigade."<sup>26</sup> Pickford herself speculated



FIGURE 8. Aunt Miranda (Josephine Crowell) ends the backyard circus for Rebecca (Mary Pickford) in *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1917). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

that the typical customer for her films was “a tired businessman who gets home, settles down when his wife says, ‘Ben, it’s Mary Pickford tonight—let’s take the children.’”<sup>27</sup> Since “Our Mary” cultivated her films’ “uplifting,” “wholesome” appeal, her account of her audience may be regarded as a savvy marketing ploy seeking to incorporate the whole spectrum of the family into her box office; it also is convergent

with the industry's belief that women determined family moviegoing habits in the 1920s.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps some men had to be coaxed to go to a Pickford film, but male critics were intrigued with her. These included Mordaunt Hall, who admitted that he found her fascinating even when he did not like her film vehicles (one of his *New York Times* reviews bemoaned the fact that so many of her films were not "adult fare").<sup>29</sup> Many male critics and commentators blended an admiration bordering on worship with open curiosity about the source(s) of her popularity. In *The Art of the Moving Picture*, Vachel Lindsay repeated the question that was often asked in popular discourse of the time: "Why do the people love Mary?" His answer to this question captures something of the power of the Pickford image:

Because of a certain aspect of her face in her highest mood. . . . The people are hungry for this fine and spiritual thing that Botticelli painted in the faces of his muses and heavenly creatures. Because the mob catch the very glimpse of it in Mary's face, they follow her night after night in the films. They are never quite satisfied with the plays because the managers are not artists enough to know they should sometimes put her into sacred pictures and not have her always the village hoyden. . . . But perhaps in this argument I have but betrayed myself as Mary's infatuated partisan.<sup>30</sup>

Lindsay's remarks may strike us at first as a strange accounting of the reasons for Pickford's popularity, for he articulates a fascination that reaches beyond the boundaries of the star's roles; indeed, he suggests that her roles and film vehicles frustrate rather than satisfy her audience.

Lindsay's "infatuation" with Pickford constitutes a useful route to the notion of a pedophilic gaze in relation to the construction of "Our Little Mary." The idea that Pickford had anything to do with sexual desire aimed at a child would have scandalized her admirers in the 1910s and 1920s. Yet how often is an aesthetic response to females, like that of Lindsay to his "doll divine," completely unconnected to a sexual one? Also speaking volumes about the unconscious sexual force of Pickford's blurring of the boundaries between her womanliness and a masquerade of childishness is a 1916 commentary by Frederick Wallace. Like Lindsay, he claims to seek the reasons for Pickford's popularity; after admitting that he has seen all her films and listing those traits she shares with other stars (personality, talent, beauty), he provides a telling answer: "What is this appeal? Frankly, I do not know, . . . [but] she is the most humanly irresistible thing I ever saw. . . . She is so adorably feminine, from her curls to her toes . . . in everything she does."<sup>31</sup>



FIGURE 9. Wistful portrait of Mary Pickford by Ira A. Hill, 1916. Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

I do not wish to argue that Pickford appealed to male admirers who were actual pedophiles. What I do wish to suggest is that Pickford appealed to and through a kind of cultural pedophilia that looked to the adorable and innocent “child-woman” to personify nostalgic ideals of femininity that were inseparable from erotic value but also moral value. In this respect Pickford’s popularity also was related to a phenomenon located in Victorian and post-turn-of-the-century academic painting by Bram Dijkstra in *Idols of Perversity*. Dijkstra argues that the representation of young girls in academic painting of the time created a venue as

much about and for the play of male sexual fantasy as it was an idealization of childhood innocence.<sup>32</sup>

Pickford's films and extratextual publicity functioned as a venue for the play of male fantasy that shares much with fin de siècle high-art representations of children. One could argue that the actress's screen impersonations of the little girl add another complication to the eroticization of female innocence. It may have provided a mechanism of disavowal ("I watch, I desire this child, but she is really not a child") to men who sought to deny such culturally prevalent sexual fantasies. As an added bonus for the play of sexual fantasy, the viewer might have rationalized any desire for the child or childlike character through the disavowing formula: "I desire this woman who looks/acts like a child because I know that she is not a child; still, she is as all women should be—innocent and childlike." By its overt performative status, Pickford's masquerade of juvenated femininity might have rendered her erotic potential safe for men.

The complex disavowal of Pickford's status as an adult woman was not limited to her screen vehicles. It was reinforced in extratextual discourse: advertisements, fan and general interest magazine articles, publicity photographs, and interviews that juvenated the actress as a star persona. Not all of these venues present Pickford in exactly the same manner, however, and as Lindsay intuited, the treatment of Pickford in publicity portraiture is different. It fixed in all its intensity the wistful, soft beauty of her juvenated star persona, a side of her that was frequently complicated or even compromised by her presentation as a wild hoyden or aggressively active child of the poor in many of her films.

In spite of these complications, within the cultural scenario of the 1910s and 1920s Pickford's portrayal of an old-fashioned girl, albeit one of high spirits, may have provided an erotic object more acceptable to many men than the overtly sexualized flapper, whose transgression of traditional feminine sexual norms was often perceived as more of a challenge than a promise. It is well documented that in the 1910s and 1920s the flapper and the New Woman symbolized American women's overturning of Victorian feminine ideals. Considered a radical subversion of American gender ideals, sexual agency among modern women was met with a great deal of cultural anxiety. As social historian Paula Fass has noted: "gazing at the young women of the period, the traditionalist saw the end of American civilization as he had known it."<sup>33</sup> Thus, the cinematic articulation of Pickford as an antimodernist, Victorian-

indebted model of femininity served as one antidote to a perceived crisis in feminine sexual behavior.

#### LIMINALITY AND THE ATTRACTIVE CHILD-WOMAN

Coming as it does during a time in which modernism and antimodernism waged a war of words over women and their desires, Pickford's impersonation of girls takes on sexual complexity, especially in relation to gendered spectatorship. That complexity is illuminated by remarks made by Martha Vicinus in another context. Vicinus argues that the symbolic function of the adolescent boy in fin de siècle culture was to "absorb and reflect a variety of sexual desires and emotional needs."<sup>34</sup> Pickford's astonishing popularity depends on a similar process. On the one hand, male fantasies were easily attached to her. She represented a dangerously attractive female whose masquerade of childishness appealed to adult men raised in the late Victorian period. In the 1910s and 1920s those men might find her enticing innocence a comforting alternative to the models of feminine sexual subjectivity offered by the flapper and the New Woman. On the other hand, Pickford's many child-woman protagonists also could serve an important identificatory function for women and girls who might view the screen actress as a comforting asexual figure of freedom whose youth released her from the demands—including the sexual demands—of adult femininity. Her characters' frequent placement in rural settings and alignment with older moral values added to the nostalgic identification that viewers, especially women viewers, might feel for a girl who is freed from having to face the confusions of modern urban living.

From the start of her film career Pickford's screen persona evidenced liminality with regard to the inscription of her age and sexuality. This is evident as early as D.W. Griffith's *The Lonely Villa* of 1909. In this house-invasion narrative Pickford plays the oldest child of a besieged suburban family. What is noticeable in this film is how Pickford is distinguished, visually, from the other female actors. She is extraordinarily beautiful. Her expressive face and large head, topped by long, soft curls, draw the eye and impress with their perfection. The sensitivity and mature beauty of her face suggest a contradictory relationship with her small body, rendered shapeless and childish by a loose, low-waisted, white dress. This typical mode of clothing for a middle-class girl of the time inscribes physical and fashion-coded childishness, but her wom-



FIGURE 10. Mary Pickford and Lionel Barrymore in *The New York Hat* (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1912). Author's collection.

anly facial beauty contributes an uncertainty as to her status: is she an untouchable child or a marriageable, sexual woman?

A similar uncertainty or ambiguity underscored many of her silent film performances—as child, adolescent, and adult—and unsettled the inscription of sexual boundaries in everything from Griffith's *The New York Hat* (1912) to *My Best Girl* (dir. Sam Taylor, 1927). In *The New York Hat* a motherless girl becomes the target of small-town gossip when she receives an anonymous gift of an elaborate, feathered hat. The hat, displayed in a store window, has been the object of desire of most of the town's female population. "Mary" is unaware that the minister (Lionel Barrymore) bought her the hat to keep trust with a poignant request left him by her mother, who was worked to death by her husband. The mother gave the clergyman a sum of money to buy her daughter "the bits of finery she has always been denied."

Is the daughter a woman or a child? Pickford spends most of the film dressed young and playing young. Although she wears the long dress of a woman, her attire is loose and obscures her figure. As if she has suddenly outgrown her clothes, her arms stick awkwardly out of her sleeves. Her attempt to look sophisticated by carrying gloves as she



walks down the street makes her look even more childish. Learning through gossips that the minister bought the expensive hat, the church elders and Mary's father suspect the worst (seduction). In a fit of outrage her father destroys the hat. The girl reacts with muted horror. Reaching for the ruined remains, she attempts to put the broken feathers back into place on the crushed brim.

The minister comforts her and shows the father and the church officials the letter entrusted to him by Mary's mother. Suddenly, with the revelation of the minister's kindness, the girl is represented as being of marriageable age when, through pantomime, the minister suggests that they marry. The scene continues to register the tension between Pickford's girlishness and womanliness as her character whispers in her father's ear to ask permission. The film's ending confirms the possibility of a mature sexual union that the rest of the film seems to vigorously deny. The denial rests chiefly in the strength of Pickford's performance of the girl as just that, a girl who appears capable of an intense interest in a hat but not in a man.

The image of the eroticized child-woman is familiar throughout the work of D.W. Griffith, where it has often been associated with Victorian ideals of femininity. Pickford's hoyden shares much with that ideal and with Griffith's child-women, but her characters' physical assertiveness and determined mind-set tend to obscure these fundamental commonalities. Pickford herself sought to distinguish her heroines from Griffith's; she came to articulate her artistic differences with the director as revolving around the exaggerated effects that he demanded in portrayals of youthful femininity. In an interview late in life she claimed, "I would not run around like a goose with its head off, crying 'oooooh . . . the little birds! Oooh . . . look! A little bunny!' That's what he taught his ingénues, and they all did the same thing."<sup>35</sup>

Mary Pickford's screen heroines, like Griffith's, exhibited qualities associated with juvenated cuteness that became an established part of the Pickford screen persona, but they were also different in important ways. *M'Liss* is exemplary in this regard. *Motion Picture News* called the film "the 'typical' Pickford picture" since it "shows her in rags and curls, in situations both humorous and dramatic."<sup>36</sup> The film is set in California mining country during the Gold Rush years. Pickford plays "M'Liss" (the nickname of "Melissa Smith"), a hoyden who does not just move among the rougher elements of the town of Red Gulch but is one of them, infamous locally for her wild ways (including her "cussing"). After the intertitle introducing "Mary Pickford as M'Liss," the film

offers an iris-framed long shot showing a huge, flat, weathered rock in the middle of the piney woods. Suddenly, a ragged girl (Pickford) runs into the frame from offscreen right, leaping onto the boulder with a little bounce. She looks around. Her golden hair is backlit. A reverse shot (iris) shows a small tree shaking. Then, a full shot shows M'Liss pulling up her right arm in exclamation and then slapping it down roughly on her leather holster. She purses her lips as she pulls a slingshot out of the holster and fusses with her other hand to get a rock from a pouch. Another shot shows the bear she has just spied. M'Liss fearlessly (and foolishly) takes aim and dings it with a rock. The bear turns. Instead of reverting to a close-up, a long shot shows M'Liss's surprised reaction registered in other typical Pickford mannerisms: the quick, almost mechanical (doll-like?) movement of her arms up in a register of surprise with a little step taken backward. The scene ends with her taking off in a vigorous, crouched run back in the same direction from whence she came.

This scene demonstrates the physical mannerisms that were already well established in the Pickford screen persona. A newspaper review of *M'Liss* summarized how the film capitalized on the appeal of its star as “the ragged little Mary everyone first learned to know and love. All the inimitable little mannerisms which are so much her own are in evidence. . . . All dressed up and in a beautiful garden she is lovely, but in funny tattered little garments, with curls flying, she is—well, just ‘our Mary.’”<sup>37</sup> As the review suggests, *M'Liss* offered signature elements of the Pickford screen persona that audiences and critics came to appreciate—and expect. Like many Pickford heroines, M'Liss is poor. She lives with her father, “Bummer” Smith (Theodore Roberts), a lovable drunkard who sleeps with Hildegarde, his prized hen, under his arm. Left to her own devices, M'Liss robs the local stagecoach for fun. She does this in a flawed disguise, covering her face with a bandana but leaving visible her distinctively ragged (and dirty) clothing. Throughout the film, in a comic touch, Pickford has M'Liss periodically hitch up her skirt like a working-class man hitching up his pants, especially in moments when she is nervously out of place (the local schoolhouse).

More than her ragged clothing, the star's distinctive mass of long curls establishes the visual appeal of M'Liss as an archetypal Pickford screen character and representative of ideal, Victorian-influenced femininity. *M'Liss* exploits the beauty of Pickford's blonde hair, featuring her famous sausage curls backlit in many scenes as she moves across the countryside by foot or on horseback. A completely gratuitous sequence highlights the importance of her long curls as a reminder that Victorian

culture regarded women's hair, especially blonde hair, as the source of a woman's almost magical sexual power.<sup>38</sup>

M'Liss decides she will go to school in the wake of accidentally destroying her doll (stolen from the stagecoach) with her slingshot. With her doll she has buried her "little gal dreams," an intertitle tells us. The handsome new schoolteacher (Thomas Meighan) encourages her to become a part of his classroom. In the next scene we see M'Liss struggling like a small child against her father as he vigorously washes her hair.<sup>39</sup> This is followed by a full shot showing M'Liss sitting on a fence in a pastoral setting. She faces the camera, but her hair obscures her face as she bends forward to dry her waist-length mass of blonde curls in the sun. Suddenly, she swings her hair back and raises her head in one fluid motion that showcases the beauty of her hair, which is given an angelic glow by the backlighting. She purses her lips, sighs, and dreamily looks into the foreground—until she sees something (offscreen) that sparks a plan. In a moment she is once again scurrying across the countryside. This may seem a reversion to innocent childhood, but the erotic qualities of M'Liss foregrounded in the scene and her interest in the schoolmaster will ultimately end in a romantic coupling with him that confirms her entry into womanhood.

The camera's fascination with M'Liss's hair demonstrates how "Our Little Mary" was not just a cute and lovable wild child but also someone whom we see in the process of becoming a woman. The lighting in this scene and throughout the film suggests the kind of visual treatment of femininity that Richard Dyer describes in reference to Lillian Gish as a paragon of whiteness. He argues that the use of halo effects and glowing three-point lighting for Gish in *True Heart Susie* (dir. D.W. Griffith, 1919) emphasizes the fairness of the star's hair and skin so that her beauty becomes "a moral value" registering aesthetic and moral superiority.<sup>40</sup>

In Pickford's films, however, there is more tension created between this kind of visualization and her characters. In spite of M'Liss's youth, the display of the star's hair works as a sexual exhibition reminiscent of those attributed to mermaids and sea sirens, popular subjects of late Victorian paintings. As Gitter suggests, "the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display. . . . The luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality."<sup>41</sup> There is something quite erotic about this film's display of its star at this moment, and Pickford's star persona, like Gish's, was affiliated with goodness, pathos,

and whiteness. Yet her vigorous physicality made her seem much less fragile than Gish; she was often not just active but rambunctious and aligned in her films with working-class hardiness.<sup>42</sup>

As *M'Liss* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* show, Pickford's heroines were less vacuous and hysterical and more assertive and hardheaded than Griffith's virginally pure child-women, but they still depended on the titillating vulnerability of the female innocent whose beauty was rarely complicated by sexual knowledge. Pickford's many motherless or orphaned heroines, like those in *Tess of the Storm Country*, *M'Liss*, *Little Annie Rooney*, and *Sparrows*, are placed within narratives that almost guarantee that a measure of pathos will be attached to the beautiful hoyden. In *M'Liss* the heroine first mourns her broken doll but then faces a life-changing loss when her father is murdered and the teacher she has come to love is accused of the crime. Little Annie Rooney also unexpectedly loses her father, a policeman. She hides at home under the table, hoping to surprise him on his return from work for his birthday celebration, but instead, another policeman comes with sad news. Orphaned, Annie is taken in by kindly Jewish neighbors.

No doubt the orphan-heroines Pickford often played appealed to many viewers as a poignant reflection of social reality; one in ten children of the time did not live with her or his parents.<sup>43</sup> Yet the codified strategies typically used to secure the audience's sentimental response to the plight of Pickford's character also reflected the influence of turn-of-the-century girls' literature. Casting Pickford as a neglected, orphaned, or poor child was a conventionalized avenue for empathetic identification with fictional girl protagonists. However, the girl protagonist's difficult circumstances also allowed her to have adventures that emphasized the enjoyable and humorous dimensions of her independence. That independence would normally be repressed in an intact nuclear family, especially a middle-class one with a watchful mother. Thus, women and girl viewers could guiltlessly rationalize the self-sufficiency of Pickford's characters since it often was acquired at the cost of home and family. Viewers might revel in Pickford's display of childhood freedom as an alternative space, a site of resistant female pleasures that slip away under the pressure of woman's cultural destiny.

After the film allows viewers to enjoy the girl's freedom, the Pickford heroine often suffers an accident or serious illness. Remarking on the appearance of this convention in girls' literature, Sally Mitchell claims that this trope functions not to reform the girl (since she is already good)



FIGURE 11. Judy Abbott (Mary Pickford) leads a revolt against prunes at the orphanage in *Daddy-Long-Legs* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1919). Author's collection.

but to soften her tomboy qualities and induce “demonstrations of love from other characters as a delicious reward of subjugation.”<sup>44</sup> Within Pickford’s oeuvre the invalidism of Stella Maris, the illness of Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, and the paralysis of Pollyanna adhere to this model. In *Pollyanna* Pickford’s heroine saves a child from being run over by an automobile, but she does so at the cost of being crushed under the wheels. Pollyanna’s legs are paralyzed. Her aunt’s emotional reserve has prevented her from showing her love for the child forced upon her, but after the accident she tenderly cares for Pollyanna. With the help of the local doctor Pollyanna is able to take her first halting steps under the gaze of all who have come to love her, including Aunt Polly.

The girl’s endurance of grief, illness, or physical incapacitation is a precursor to her acceptance of a more restrained womanhood. Growing up may signal loss of freedom, but many Pickford films hold out the promise of romantic love as compensation for their heroines’ lost childhood. Typical in this regard is *Daddy-Long-Legs*, which Kevin Brownlow has called “the archetypal Mary Pickford film . . . [having]



FIGURE 12. Altruism and illness bring the orphan (Mary Pickford) open expressions of love in *Pollyanna* (dir. Paul Powell, 1920). Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

all the elements an audience could hope for: a baby rescued from an ash can, an orphanage run like a penitentiary, hilarious and touching comedy, much pathos, and a lover waiting in the wings for Pickford's character to grow up."<sup>45</sup> The "lover waiting in the wings" certainly applies to Pickford films as early as *The New York Hat* and comes to be the expected formula for resolution in many of her feature films. In *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, Rebecca dons her Sunday best to sell soap door-to-door. Her goal is to secure a soap company prize (a lamp) to give to a poor family in town. During this door-to-door campaign the assertive Rebecca unexpectedly reverts to babyish confusion when Adam Ladd (whom she calls "Mr. Aladdin") shows her attention. In *Little Annie Rooney* the title character's escapades in leading her tenement gang of rock-throwing children end suddenly when she runs into Joe Kelly (William Haines), a grown man. He laughs at her, which makes her angry, but, of course, he will ultimately be her mate because, as the intertitles tell us, at this first meeting of child and man, she feels something for him that she cannot identify.

In spite of such moments the child's heterosexual love interest is quite marginalized in many of Pickford's films, for the heroine's bonding to other children takes precedence in her emotional life. Sometimes the heroine is simultaneously a motherless child and a child playing mother. This reproduction of mothering is poignantly offered in *Daddy-Long-Legs*. Judy Abbott (Pickford) steals a beautiful doll from a spoiled rich girl to lend to a sick orphan. Orphanage officials chase Judy in a scene that is played for comedy, but after they catch her, she is brutally punished, burned on a stove. Later that night, Judy cradles the sick orphan in her arms. She attempts to comfort the little girl with another doll, a crude, homemade one that Judy has obviously fashioned herself. The little girl only wants her "mama." An intertitle says: "Out of the great unknown the mother hears the call and comes with loving arms to take her baby home." Judy, who was left in an ash can as an infant, lightly holds her hand over her heart as she looks down on the bundle in her arms. Realizing the child is dead, she silently looks up to the heavens. Judy is still a girl, but her capacity for love affirms her potential to attain a superior womanhood in terms that resonate with the era's most traditional, family-centered values.<sup>46</sup> This scene suggests the "glows of feminine portraiture" suggested by Dyer as visual signifiers of the moral and aesthetic virtues of womanhood.<sup>47</sup> *Variety's* reviewer correctly observed that "the punch of the picture is not in the love story of Judy grown up falling [in] love, . . . but in the pathos of the wistful little Judy, with her heart full of love, being constantly misunderstood."<sup>48</sup>

While figuring in *Daddy-Long-Legs* in this poignant scene, the talented orphan's ability to help other children forms the entire plot of *Sparrows*. "Mama Molly" (Pickford) is established as the oldest orphan at a Florida baby farm. A baby arrives, and Molly decides it "doesn't belong" because it is obviously well fed and so must be from a caring family. To keep the baby from being killed, Molly decides that all the children must escape. Though a mere adolescent in pigtails, she leads them in a harrowing journey across alligator-infested swamps to safety—and a new life. That life serves only to reinforce our confusion about her sexuality and age. In the mansion of the baby's widowed father Molly continues to look after the tiny child who motivated the escape. The wealthy father agrees to adopt the other children, but his relationship to Molly remains unclear: will she be another adopted child or his new wife?

Whether it was important to her audiences that Pickford's characters found romantic success in her films is uncertain. Often, as in *Sparrows*,

*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, and *Pollyanna*, her maturation into marriageable womanhood remains ambiguous. We cannot be certain that nascent or overt romance in these films necessarily held the most important appeal to her viewers, including to specific demographic segments (like women) of the audience. Or perhaps Pickford intuited that, after masquerading as a child, she should not completely spoil the illusion of girlhood that she had worked so hard to perfect. The final scene of *Daddy-Long-Legs* shows Rebecca discovering that Jarvis Pendleton (Mahlon Hamilton), the wealthy older man who has courted her, is also “Daddy-Long-Legs,” the benefactor who has anonymously paid for her college education. Indirectness dominates the film’s romantic conclusion: a huge wingback chair blocks the audience’s view of Rebecca and Jarvis as they embrace and kiss. Only the changing rhythm of Rebecca’s legs swinging over the side of the chair suggests what may be happening between them. Evidencing even greater avoidance of adult eroticism, the last shot of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* shows Rebecca running off into the distance to escape the kiss of Adam Ladd. Through different means Wiggin’s original story registers its discomfort with making its seventeen-year-old heroine grow up into a sexualized adult. The novel reveals Adam’s perspective on Rebecca: “He had looked into her eyes and they were still those of a child; there was no knowledge of the world . . . no passion, nor comprehension of it.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, at the end of *Little Annie Rooney* Annie says she “might wanna marry” Joe, but this will have to wait until the future, “when I grow up.” Perhaps the love story in Pickford’s films was important chiefly to signal that the heroine will be properly recognized as “priceless,” as someone who deserves to be appreciated, understood, and cared for—whether by family or future husband.

Even without a romantic ending, however, the inscription of Pickford’s adolescent heroines in these rags-to-riches scenarios had plenty of built-in appeal to women viewers, who could readily identify with Pickford’s character as a girl who manages to eek out a great deal of fun from her rather miserable childhood. Pickford’s films are remembered for their comedy but also for their pathos. In spite of the sentimental investment of her audiences in the actress and in her many “cute” screen characters, Pickford’s films are also rather insistent in their emphasis on the effects of economics on girls. This resonated with cultural changes toward children and reformist efforts to improve their lives, most particularly, to release the young from the burdens of labor. An unexpectedly uncompromising approach to this issue is evident in two films in



which Pickford refused to follow her own oft-repeated formula signaling the transition between girlhood freedom and womanly submission to love. As the plain Cockney laundress in *Suds* (dir. John Francis Dillon, 1920) and as the homely slave, Unity Blake, in *Stella Maris* (dir. Marshall Neilan, 1918), Pickford used character roles to depict girlhoods of drudgery and deprivation. In these films childhood losses are not, as in so many other Pickford films, redeemed by blossoming beauty and the promise of a loving—and economically comfortable—marriage.

#### THE “DOLL DIVINE” AS A NEW WOMAN

As I have argued, in Pickford’s films women were allowed to relive the pleasures and pains of girlhood and to identify with “Our Little Mary” incarnated as a feisty, irrepressible tomboy and altruistic little mother. However, these characters simultaneously carried an identity as the beautiful and successful adult actress and powerful New Woman known as Mary Pickford. Through star discourse the masquerade of childhood that Pickford played out in the plots of her films was extended and served as a means of disavowing or neutralizing the revisionary or emancipatory values contained in the distinctively New Woman elements of her career and personal life, including her business acumen, her immense wealth, her divorce and remarriage, and her childlessness.

As the star system developed, a gap between the fictitious screen persona and the offscreen “real” star persona was acknowledged and sometimes encouraged. The juvenating publicity surrounding Pickford coexisted with and often contradicted widespread public knowledge of the more adult particulars of the actress’s private life as a grown woman.

In the early years of her stardom, signs of childishness were represented through publicity and promotion to be indicative of Pickford’s “real self.” The actress was depicted as an innocent adolescent girl who practiced piano and obeyed her mother, Mrs. Charlotte Pickford. In 1913, when Mary was twenty-one years old, *Cosmopolitan’s* “An Actress from the Movies” declared her to be an “unsophisticated believer in fairies” and the “pet of playgoers all over the country who don’t even know her name.”<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Pickford was regularly depicted as the driving force in her daughter’s career and life, a strong, caring mother who served as Mary’s business manager. One article described Charlotte as having “a rugged and unafraid personality.”<sup>51</sup> In 1915, *Ladies’ Home Journal’s* “The Most Popular Girl in America” offered Mary supposedly in dialogue with her “girlfriends” (or more exactly, her fans); the actress

notes that her “mother will not let [her] eat candy.”<sup>52</sup> *Photoplay*’s 1917 article “Speaking of the Actress” declared of Pickford: “If everybody was as pureminded as she, there would be no sin in the world.”<sup>53</sup>

Yet by 1916 it was also common knowledge that “Little Mary” was married (and had been since 1911) to Owen Moore, an actor she had met at Biograph.<sup>54</sup> Movie mogul Adolph Zukor says that during this time, when Pickford was contracted to Famous Players, Moore’s “name did not creep into Mary’s copy,” and the actor was excluded from his wife’s public appearances because the studio wanted to perpetuate the impression that Pickford was “a teen-ager.”<sup>55</sup> There was also an ambiguous representation of Mary’s domestic life in star discourse, as in “Before Nine and after Five with Mary Pickford” (1917). The fan magazine article leaves the impression that Mary is “a girl” who still lives with her beloved “Mumsey”; her mother is “her constant companion both at work and at play,” but the existence of Owen Moore is acknowledged. He is absent, however, because “on many occasions the camera calls him to another part of the globe.”<sup>56</sup> A photo accompanying the article shows Pickford writing her husband. Thus, Mary Pickford remains juvenated, bound in her home life to her mother rather than to a man.

Publicity sought to constitute the established “truth” of Mary Pickford’s star persona in girlish innocence, but Pickford’s relationship to both truth and innocence was called into question in 1918, when the actress faced the possibility of a career-ending sexual scandal. In that year superstar Douglas Fairbanks separated from his socialite wife, Beth Sully, mother to his nine-year-old son, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. Rumors flew that Pickford, who had joined Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin on Liberty war bond tours in 1917, was the cause of his marital breakup. Mrs. Fairbanks initially told reporters that her husband was involved with an actress she would not name.<sup>57</sup> The breakup of Fairbanks’s marriage was followed by Pickford’s divorce from Moore, but Leonard J. Fowler, attorney general of Nevada, accused Pickford of collusion and of falsifying her Nevada residency to obtain her divorce. He brought suit to annul the Pickford-Moore divorce.<sup>58</sup> Once that embarrassment was settled, Pickford and Fairbanks hastily married in March 1920.

The scandal of adultery and divorce threatened to ruin Pickford’s carefully constructed star persona and its claim to authenticity in a childlike femininity largely removed from sexual agency. Because her behaviors could be interpreted as showing a lack of respect for marriage and uncontrolled female desire, Pickford was in danger of being linked to the sexually transgressive modern women condemned by

social conservatives. In *Century Magazine* the philosopher Will Durant wrote that history would look back on women in the 1920s and observe how marriage, “[an] institution which had lasted ten thousand years, was destroyed in a generation.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, the ability of Pickford fans to accept the sudden revelation of the family-shattering desire of “Our little Mary” for a married man and vice versa might suggest an amazing wholesale disavowal of whatever might mark the “doll divine” as an adult or interfere with the comforting collapse/merger between the onscreen child and adolescent and the offscreen actress. This disavowal should not be taken for granted as a natural occurrence. The constructed discourse of stardom was crucial to Pickford’s ability to weather the storm of scandal.

After the scandal broke in 1918, the Pickford publicity machine went into overdrive to re-juvenate the actress, realign her with an ideologically conservative view of femininity, and curb negative public reaction against the actress’s offscreen behavior. Indeed, a change in the Pickford family discourse in virtual simultaneity with Fairbanks’s separation from his wife suggests a conscious intervention. Displacing the specter of scandal, this discourse encouraged the filmgoing public to see Mary Pickford as a woman who deserved compassion, not condemnation. The rearticulation of her relationship to her family was key: through reference to her childhood of hard work and unhappiness, publicity justified Mary Pickford as a woman seeking romantic happiness with a married man.

At the center of this rearticulation of the Pickford family discourse was the revision of Mary Pickford’s relationship with her mother. Charlotte’s formerly dominant role with her daughter was altered to call attention to Mary as a dutiful daughter to an emotionally supportive but financially dependent mother. Mary is portrayed as the working-class daughter who, at an early age, takes on the role of breadwinner—thus sacrificing her childhood—to keep her family together.<sup>60</sup> This strategy is apparent as early as 1918, when an article in *American Magazine* claimed, “We all didn’t know until recently that Mary Pickford was a breadwinner at the stupendous age of five.”<sup>61</sup> The author recounts how Pickford’s mother, struggling as a stage actress in second- and third-rate theatrical companies, was accompanied by Gladys, then aged five, to a rehearsal of the famous play *Bootles’ Baby: A Story of the Scarlet Lancers*. With the role of the baby suddenly vacated, Gladys/Mary volunteers to audition. Ranck recounts the child standing in “patched and worn shoes, her legs encased in intricately darned stockings—eyes bright

and serious. . . . ‘I’ll do it,’ she piped up.”<sup>62</sup> Gladys’s clothes suggest poverty but also register the mother’s care of her child through attention to the little girl’s “intricately darned” stockings. The child’s own eagerness to act absolves Charlotte of an inappropriate desire to force her child to work. Instead of being the stereotypical “stage mother” who perversely turns from domesticity to the entertainment business in order to live out her own ambitions through her child, Charlotte is a caring, albeit struggling, young mother. The daughter’s talent becomes, as the informed reader knows, the key to relieving the family’s poverty.

Public commentaries by Pickford on her girlhood began to follow trends in contemporary reformist discourse about the evils of putting children to work. Using her own “miserable” childhood as a stage actress as an example of what required reform, Mary Pickford’s life story as standardized in articles throughout the 1920s followed lines similar to the sentimental discourse on girls that had long structured her films. The fan or reader is emotionally instructed to shed a tear over Pickford’s past as a working child. Pickford appeals to readers’ feelings in one newspaper interview from March 1921: “Even childhood is a terrible thing. I had one of the dearest mothers in the world, but I was an unhappy child.”<sup>63</sup> In another from around the same time, she is quoted: “I’ve been acting since I was five years old. I’m glad I was able to help my mother. We had no man to look after us, but I missed all the sweet things of childhood that other people have to look back on. . . . It’s rather a cruel life for a child.”<sup>64</sup>

The actress condemns the practice of children acting in films to support adults who could work, but she makes her own work as a child actress a different order of experience. That difference is based on her loving relationship with her mother. Pickford’s autobiography, serialized in 1923 in *Ladies’ Home Journal*, tells a story that could be taken from one of her films. Mary relates how a rich doctor wanted to adopt her and that her mother allowed her “to choose for myself.” She preferred “mother above riches,” but that meant working: “I had to give up my own childhood, but it was necessary in my case—either work or be separated from my mother.”<sup>65</sup>

Because she was depicted as a woman whose responsibilities to her mother and siblings meant she never knew happiness as a girl, Mary’s scandalous remarriage to Fairbanks was portrayed as her reward for years of service as a dutiful working daughter. This sentiment was expressed in the *Los Angeles Times*: “No one, I’m sure, speaking humanly, who sees these two together could possibly wish to take their



FIGURE 13. Fan photo of Mary Pickford after she cut her hair, ca. 1928. Author's collection.

happiness from them—Mary, especially, perhaps, with her years of conscientious, hard labor, when as a mere child, she was mother to all her family, Jack, Lottie, even her own mother.”<sup>66</sup>

In the 1920s, as more commentary asked when she was going to “grow up,” Pickford’s portrayals of childhood were increasingly attributed to her personal need to experience a childhood she had missed because of work. There is acknowledgment that her extreme youth is a construction, but its fictionality is disavowed, as is its function as a commercial tactic. Instead, juvenation is justified by the authenticity of Pickford’s emotional need to create for herself a “true” childhood, even if belated and confined to the movie screen. Like her second marriage, her portrayal of girls on the screen became a sign of the actress’s wish-fulfilling reach for the happiness that had eluded her in her difficult childhood. In a newspaper article of 1923, “A Character Study

of the Real Mary Pickford: Woman and Genius,” the author recounts the actress’s accomplishments, her intellectual power, her “genius” as an artist. Her ultimate attainment, however, remains securely feminine: it is her “power to give happiness,” which is linked to her own girlhood of economic deprivation and premature assumption of responsibility: “You may note a somewhat wistful look in her eyes as she tells you that among other things that she has missed in life was a REAL CHILDHOOD . . . [so] she decided to weave a fictitious one for herself on screen.”<sup>67</sup> Such an article signals a desire to justify Pickford’s masquerade of childishness by establishing its etiology in the actress’s life history.

Yet, this would not be the last explanation for the persistence of Mary Pickford’s girl roles. In 1928, after the death of her mother, Mary cut off her famous curls. Adela Rogers St. Johns claimed in *Photoplay* that not only had “the long beautifully arranged curls” been “Mrs. Pickford’s idea” but that Charlotte had lovingly dominated Mary, keeping her in curls and little-girl roles because she refused to recognize that her daughter and times had changed.<sup>68</sup> St. Johns absolves Pickford of responsibility in sustaining her child-woman roles as she marks a turning point in the star’s career. As in earlier fan discourse, it is Mary’s love for her mother that governs her choices. She is, above all, a good, obedient, loving daughter. Only after her mother’s death could Mary Pickford grow up as an artist and a woman.

#### LOST GIRLHOODS

Commentary like Lindsay’s on Pickford, the “doll divine,” suggests the sustained power of the late nineteenth-century idealization of the child-woman as a sentimentalized object of desire. Pickford’s popularity drew on powerful cultural attitudes that sentimentalized and eroticized the emergent sexuality of girls and adolescents at a time when women’s more assertive and self-determined sexual desires were regarded as an intrusion into the traditional male domain of sexual subjectivity and a threat to the primacy of the family. Within the historical context of this widespread social discourse, Pickford’s textual and extratextual construction exemplifies an antimodernist rearticulation of the Victorian child-woman as a sexually controllable and idealized version of beautiful white femininity with origins in fin de siècle attitudes toward the “sacred child.”

While we might assume that the conscious intent of Pickford’s films

was *not* to create such a sexually enticing figure, the construction of the actress's appeal still serves as a model for broader late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representational trends in the sexualized representation of "the girl" or very juvenated femininity. Here I should acknowledge that there is always a danger for film scholars working with historically remote materials of reading back into an earlier era the preoccupations of our own—including sexual preoccupations. That said, we should not forget that Western culture has frequently rendered a woman masquerading as a child or with culturally coded childlike qualities as sexually enticing in ways that a male masquerading as a child is not.

In reading textual and extratextual materials attached to the star over a number of years, it seems apparent that Pickford's juvenation as a curly-headed girl of the lower class created all the required elements to permit a disguised sexual enjoyment for male viewers of the 1910s and 1920s. Nevertheless, the pedophilic aspect of male viewing should not be regarded as the only pleasure available to men in watching Pickford's moving pictures or gazing at her image. Male viewers may have shared a host of feelings that Pickford's films also made available to women, including reform-minded concern for children, nostalgia for childhood, and identification with the child's freedom to make mischief.

We might first consider it unlikely that men, like women viewers, would experience a nostalgic pleasure in looking back on the lost freedom of an "asexual" girlhood through Pickford's films. However, Catherine Robson has argued that girl-lovers of the late nineteenth century were middle-class men looking for their own lost girlhoods, that is, for their feminized origins in early childhood, before the demands of Victorian masculinity alienated them from their truer lost selves. She argues that such a masculine investment in identifying with the girl "complicates narratives of pedophilic desire that have habitually been employed to explain the work of some of the nineteenth century's most infamous girl-lovers," such as John Ruskin and the Reverend Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll).<sup>69</sup> If this kind of investment also held true for Vachel Lindsay and other heterosexual men in the early twentieth century, Pickford's image (onscreen and off) might have offered some male viewers pleasure in identifying with the pure young female, in addition to the pleasure of finding a confirmation of aesthetic perfection and spirituality in a child-woman whose erotic promise elided the threatening sexual agency of modern women. Thus, Pickford's image—both textual and extratextual—proved liminal enough to negotiate a wide range of sexual desires and identifications.

The multiple possibilities of how Mary Pickford was received by her historical audiences—male and female—suggest that Pickford’s persona as the erotically attractive but juvenated female functioned culturally and psychologically for her audiences in potentially far more complex and contradictory ways than is generally acknowledged. Pickford’s on- and offscreen masquerade of childishness and the slippage between eroticized adult femininity and her inscriptions of aesthetically perfected children were attached to some meanings that appear to be quite historically and culturally specific to the waning days of the “cult of the girl” and the “age of the child.” Other meanings may have lingered or been rearticulated in a different cinematic form in subsequent eras with different cultural forces and economic imperatives operating. After all, we should not forget the Great Depression and that other sacred child of the screen, Shirley Temple, who made several films based on the same source material as Pickford vehicles. Temple, who rose to stardom shortly after Pickford’s retirement in 1933, raises equally interesting but necessarily different questions about the performance of childhood on the screen and the pleasures it offered. Temple’s stardom and its representation of juvenated femininity in the 1930s will be addressed in the next chapter.

The star persona of “Little Mary” was produced in ubiquitous representations intended to represent innocence but implicated in a sexualized gaze fixed on the screen fiction of the girl-child played by a woman. Pickford’s stardom and its relation to sexuality also resonate with the contemporary phenomenon of shifting boundaries between child and adult. Those shifts are manifested in both a pervasive fear of and campaign against sexually explicit material depicting children; simultaneously, they are manifested in ubiquitous display of images of juvenated sexuality that characterize much twenty-first-century media culture. Contemporary perception of the child and current cultural practice often produce a sexualization of representations of childhood, even in discourses that ostensibly seek to prohibit it.<sup>70</sup> This provides an echo of Pickford that may not be the exact semiotic equivalent of her effects but is related to them. Thus, we might be led to conclude that the interplay of gender, power, and sexuality in the construction and reception of Mary Pickford is more relevant to our own experience of mass media than Vachel Lindsay, adoring poet, might ever have imaged of his own “doll divine.”