

The Poor Little Rich Girl

By Eileen Whitfield

Excerpt from "Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood," published by University Press of Kentucky, 1997. Reprinted by permission of the author.

In "The Poor Little Rich Girl" (1917), Pickford and screenwriter Frances Marion created a new note for Mary's image. Instead of appearing as a childlike woman, she appeared as a child, pure and simple. And yet this is not a children's movie. Like Broadway plays, silent movies often turned to children's classics for their themes. Scores of films featured odd, spunky orphans like those in the pages of L.M. Montgomery and Frances Hodgson Burnett. Viewers also recognized the hypocrites who surround this child—the grim old aunt who refuses to smile, perhaps, or the snobbish society matron—knowing that they would eventually melt in the face of the heroine's humor and virtue. And the charming child becomes a beauty, finds a good man's love, and rests secure.

"In the Home of Everything except the love she cared for, dwelt Gwendolyn, the Poor Little Rich Girl." Gwendolyn is a rare role for Pickford: she is wealthy. She is also a prisoner in her house, surrounded by sneering servants and parents who do little more than pass her in the hallway. Gwendolyn asks no more than the pleasures any child enjoys – going for walks (forbidden: she might be kidnapped), the company of other children, and occasional contact with her parents ("Mother is very busy today, dear.") When two servants, hoping to make Gwendolyn sleep, accidentally give her too big a dose from a bottled labeled "Poison," Gwen nearly dies. Her parents, stricken, now provide the love for which Gwendolyn yearns. They also follow her doctor's prescription: a trip to the country, gingham dresses, going barefoot, and making mud pies. "Oh!" cries Gwen blissfully. "I love mud."

Most of us retain hazy memories of childhood. A feeling or a mood may remain, but we cannot re-experience the world as children. But sometimes an artist remembers acutely and creates a portrait that is startlingly fresh. In film, Steven Spielberg has sometimes done it. Francois Truffaut succeeded always. In silent film, Richard Barthelmess, a grown man in 1921, seemed convincingly thirteen in "Tol'able David." But few performers accomplish the

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TRADE PRESS LAUDS MARY PICKFORD'S GREATEST PICTURE

MOTION PICTURE NEWS SAID:
"A Poor Little Rich Girl" is a striking argument for longer runs, for higher prices—for more better pictures. In advertising it the exhibitor has his Mary Pickford to display in the usual capitals, and in addition he has the title of the play, its author, and its Broadway run to boast to the skies. It ranks a hundred per cent in artistic value and another hundred in commercial value, which at least make it a release of twofold worth.

NEW YORK TELEGRAPH SAID:
The production is a genuine credit to Mary Pickford, Maurice Tourneur and its authors, and the work of a well-chosen cast also deserves comment. The lavish settings, fine photography, lighting and tinting effects, combined with a story that is novel, full of humor and pathos and subtly instructive, make it one of Mary Pickford's best—perhaps the most satisfactory picture, every detail considered, in which she has ever appeared.

MOVING PICTURE WORLD SAID:
A great deal of credit is due the star for her splendid portrayal of the eleven-year-old "Gwen." Entirely free from the ordinary stock tricks of the ordinary child impersonator, she looks the part amazingly well, especially in the close-ups, and acts with a skilful blending of her own personality and that of a bright and winsome "kiddie" that makes the illusion perfect. Her Gwendolyn will rank as one of her best screen creations.

EXHIBITOR'S TRADE REVIEW SAID:
Had not Mary Pickford already attained worldwide reputation in filmdom her part of "Gwen" in a "Poor Little Rich Girl" would in one public showing establish her firmly as a stellar attraction of the silent drama.



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An advertisement for "The Poor Little Rich Girl" featured in the March 1917 edition of "Motion Picture News" touts the film as Mary Pickford's greatest picture. From the Library of Congress collection as made available through the Media History Digital Library. <http://mediahistoryproject.org/>

physical transformation that, to Pickford, was second nature. She was physically suited—short, with a head a shade too large for her body. She added technique to this advantage, a process which she described to *Vanity Fair*: relax the brow and corners of the mouth, point toes inward, loosen legs. Indeed, Gwen is wonderfully observed—as in the difficult business of going downstairs hand in hand with an adult, hanging back, attempting to use the feet as brakes, then giving up and hanging like a dead weight. In happier moments, she ends her skips with a flat-footed jump, carries a stuffed bear around by the legs, and is seen dancing with manic concentration, a star in her own dream and utterly absorbed.

But this would have been mere puppetry if Mary had not been able to call up a child's inner world, untouched by the filter of adulthood. "That phase of my life," she recalled, "was un-lived." While she was

playing the father to other children, her own childhood had been “walled up inside of me.... I needed to express it.” To do so, she used a technique of turning on a dime emotionally – flashing for instance, from tears to anger, anger to boredom, tedium to joy. The practice, when she had used it at Biograph, made her ingénues funny, capricious and adolescent. And it proved exactly right for children, who can swing from rage, pain, or skinned elbows to joy -- and back again – in an instant. In a short schoolroom scene in “The Poor Little Rich Girl,” Gwen looks intimidated by the teacher, affects concentration, refuses to do lessons, earnestly follows the dancing master, then collapses inconsolably into tears. The cumulative effect is uncanny. The child seems vulnerable, open to experience, unable to dissemble, yet resilient. She also seems even shorter than Pickford’s height of five feet, as art director Ben Carré used furniture two-thirds larger than scale. Maurice Tourneur’s stylized direction polished off Gwen’s gloomy world. The servants, for instance, enter in a surreal march, as though they were flying monkeys guarding the castle of the wicked witch.

This might have been too much of a good thing had not Marion and Pickford insisted on humor. They took credit for some simple gags: a child sitting in a pie, for instance. But they threw in the slapstick unannounced, and Tourneur was bewildered. “Mlle. Pickford,” he protested, “show me where in the script it says you are to do that.” Indeed, the book by Eleanor Gates and the Broadway production in 1913 were unrelievedly melancholy. “It is not in the play,” explained Tourneur, “and I do not find it in the script. *Mais non; c’est une horreur!*” Mary thought Tourneur had no sense of humor. “I am a dignified man,” he agreed, “and my pictures should be dignified.” He would complain at length, years later, about curly-haired, interfering actresses, and Pickford chose other directors for her projects. But they finished “The Poor Little Rich Girl” with a smile, though perhaps a strained one.

The picture was shown first to studio executives. Pickford and Marion joined them, anticipating triumph. On the contrary, Pickford’s “masterpiece of comedy,” filled with Marion’s “spontaneous combustions,” played to the silence of a tomb. When the lights came up, the word most frequently voiced was “putrid.” The reception struck Pickford’s Achilles heel of guilt, and she drove home and cried herself to sleep. Frances Marion drove home too, crawled under the bed, and sobbed that she had ruined Mary Pickford’s career and hoped she would die soon. All very well, remembered Pickford. “But I had to live and face the music.”

Fortune finally smiled when, in March 1917, at New York’s Strand, Pickford and Frances Marion attended the premiere. According to Marion, Pickford entered with dark glasses and her hat pulled low on her face. Then she listened, stunned, as the audience laughed, wept audibly, and cheered. Mary wept, too, and removed her glasses – probably a conscious decision, as an usher soon recognized the famous face. Instantly she was mobbed by fans who begged for snippets of her hair, ripped fur from her coat, and tore her hat to shreds. With the help of a column of mounted policemen, Mary rose from a sea of bodies and escaped with her screenwriter in a taxi. Pickford told a quietly different story of waking up one morning in California to twenty-five telegrams praising the movie... and her spirits rose effortlessly, like a feather.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Eileen Whitfield began her career as an actress on Canadian stages and television. She became a journalist in 1980, and worked as an editor and writer at Toronto Life and Saturday Night magazines. She has also written on cultural subjects for Canada’s national newspapers The Globe and Mail and The National Post. Her play, “Alice and Emily,” was performed at the Citadel Theatre, in 1993. An independent scholar of silent film, she is the author of the biography Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood and a contributor to Mary Pickford: Queen of the Movies.