

**Margaret Gillett**

## **The Becoming of Caroline\***

In the field of Education, we talk a lot about individual differences — how teachers should recognize them, how the curriculum should be organized around them, how the schools should foster them. Yet, I am inclined to think this is one of the greatest con games in contemporary education. We still do not think in terms of individuals; we really worry about categories. We acknowledge that the quest for individual identity is one of the all-important concerns of education but — perhaps it's the pressure of mass age numbers — we are hung up on roles. Socially defined roles certainly can engender a sense of security, they may even be short-cuts to identity; but they are pre-packaged, not custom-made; they may be convenient, but they are not always apt; they tell you what you're supposed to do, not who you are. Just last week, I heard of a homely, but very telling, example of this.

A colleague of mine has a three-year old daughter, Caroline. She recently had her hair cut short and her father, who perhaps is not quite up-to-date with boys' hairdos, teased her and said, "Caroline's a boy, Caroline's a boy!" "I'm not," cried Caroline in confusion and distress, "I'm a girl." Caroline likes to go shopping. She decided to go by herself and, being a practical child, she took along most of the things in her mother's jewelry box, including the housekeeping money. Hours later, her frantic mother located her at the police station (with only \$12 left). The police had picked her up near the highway but, though she knows her name and

\*Address given at the Cap and Gown Convocation, Russell Sage College, Troy, N.Y., April 27, 1971.

address very well, she wouldn't give them to the police. All she would say was, "I'm a girl. I'm a girl."

The question is, how will she become Caroline? There are enormous pressures for her to accept and to play a role — the role of girl as our society has defined it.

The influences start very subtly and very early. In infancy, Caroline was put in pink, not blue, baby clothes. Those innocent pink booties could become bonds of expectation and perhaps they are really only milder forms of the classic Chinese footbinding which physically, as well as psychologically, defined the role girls would play.

As Caroline emerged from infancy, she was still allowed to play with cuddly toys and was permitted to cry — not so her brother. She has learned some winning, "girlish" ways — she follows her mother around the house with a duster and a tiny mop, she empties her father's ashtrays, she's encouraged to be clean and tidy, while her brother is playing ball outside in the mud.

Next year, she'll go to kindergarten and soon she'll learn to read. In children's books, she'll find plenty of reinforcement for the role for which she is being programmed. She will probably encounter as many girls as boys in the stories she reads. For the most part they will be girls with dolls, girls with kittens, girls who help with the new baby just like a little mommy. There will be some, but few, dynamic girls and non-domesticated women. According to a recent "women's" magazine article on children's books, most of the mothers portrayed will be vapid and passive, most of them serving as cooks, laundresses, and cleaning women. I hope Caroline will not read a blatant apology for the status quo by a Whitney Darrow called *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* It says fearlessly, "Boys have trucks." "Girls have dolls." "Boys are doctors." "Girls are nurses." "Boys fix things." "Girls need things fixed." "Girls can cook." "Boys invent things." "Girls use what boys invent." Caroline will probably not be able to escape the formula story of the tomboy who, at the end of the book, concedes that her mother was right, that dresses can be pretty, and gives up "boyish" activities in favor of her traditional role of helper and tea-pourer.

What is called "sexism in children's literature" is at last rousing serious concern and has recently been the subject of papers in popular magazines and learned journals as well as at Children's Book Week conferences. This exposure of

the subtle indoctrination is welcome, but I think it should be pointed out that the issue is not really one of sex — or sexism — but it's a matter of gender. This distinction really ought to be preserved throughout the entire debate on Women's Lib.

But to return to Caroline — as she goes up through the school system, even though she attends co-ed schools, she will find that there are still “girl's” subjects and “boy's” subjects and that teachers and guidance people will try to channel her into appropriate “girl's” programs. She may take an interest in sports, but in her highschool years she will learn that it may be all right to play well but not *too* well if she is to conform to the social mores and dating patterns. Otherwise, she may find that she has no boyfriends and may later have an experience like the one I had here in Troy while I was at Russell Sage. I used to play tennis on the public courts in the park at the top of the hill. One day I played with a young man who happened to be a Negro and, perhaps, I beat him. At the end he said, “You play well — for a woman.” His condescension was unconscious and I didn't have the heart to reply, “You play well for a Negro.” It is just assumed, deep down, that women are always inferior — and we're supposed to accept it. Women's role, in sports especially, is to stop doing and become spectators or, as the swinging hockey star of the Boston Bruins, Derek Sanderson, said, “Girls are just part of the equipment.”

Anyway, when Caroline gets to college, she may be able to take a course in Women's Studies and get a systematic analysis of all this. She may be amazed to discover that John Stuart Mills' great book, *The Subjection of Women*, was written as long ago as 1869 and she might also be surprised to discover that a man, Ashley Montagu, wrote a book on *The Natural Superiority of Women*. She'll find other revelations in works like Mary Beard's *Women as Force in History*, Caroline Bird's *Born Female*, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. She may get fired up or furious with the essays now pouring out of the Women's Lib. movement — Robin Morgan's *The Sisterhood is Powerful*, for example, and she may be lucky enough to get hold of the best-selling Canadian publication, *Royal Commission Report on the Status of Women*. She may simply encounter this question in her general reading. Perhaps she'll come across Meredith's statement, “Woman is the last thing to be civilized by man” (1859); or she'll see Ibsen's *Doll's House*;

or laugh at Thurber's perennial "battle of the sexes"; or read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. She may or may not be amused by Dr. Johnson's intended witticism about the educated woman and the performing dog — it's not a question of how well they do it, it's against nature and a miracle that they do it at all!

But our Caroline is more likely to be reading Marshall McLuhan than Dr. Johnson. She will find that he claims in the *Gutenberg Galaxy* that by 1929 women had been homogenized by the movies and photo advertising, reduced to uniformity and repeatability. In *The Mechanical Bride*, she will read how "the images of advertisements and movies presented a mechanized image for women. Although her skirts were shortened, the woman of the thirties and forties pulled herself *in* with corsets and *up* with bras; glamor photos were taken on tiptoe, emphasizing the rigidity of the mechanical pull on the leg; the individual piece of anatomy — a leg with a stocking, a bust with a bra — were illustrated as fragments or replaceable parts. Finally, in the forties, the drum major-ette appeared — An adolescent love notice, a junior chorus girl in cavalry officer attire... instructed in the art of symbolic flagellation."

Caroline may scoff at these generalities and want to go on with her education and her career. The idea of her becoming a physician, for example, is not impossible and she won't have to fight the strenuous battles of a hundred years ago. Maria Montessori, Italy's first woman doctor and later famous educator, had to argue her way into medical school, had to be escorted by a chaperone and, since it was not decorous for a young woman to work on cadavers with men, she had to practice her anatomy alone at night. Caroline won't have that, but she may have quotas to contend with and subtle discriminations that manage to keep the number of female physicians in the U.S. at about 7% of the total (in contrast to 85% in the U.S.S.R.). If she decides to take up another career, she will also encounter prejudice. This is one reason why Claire Kirkland Casgrain, the only woman in the Quebec National Assembly, has said that women in politics are "as rare as whooping cranes." And even here in the U.S. you don't have many, though two new ones were elected to the present Congress. There was once a woman mayor of Ottawa, Canada's capital. She was Charlotte Whitton and she pointed out that, for a woman to succeed in business or politics, she had to be at least twice as good as a man and,

she added, "Luckily, this isn't difficult!" There was also once a woman in the Canadian cabinet, Judy LaMarsh. She wrote in her memoirs that she was always something of a second class citizen, not in the mainstream, partly because so many of the important decisions were made in a place from which she was banned, the executive washroom.

But Caroline might decide to go in for teaching, traditionally a woman's job. If she does, she will most likely get equal pay, but she will find that the path to promotion is narrow, that relatively few high schools have women principals and that a decreasing number of elementary schools have women at the head. If she teaches at the college level she will discover that, as late as 1970, women were discriminated against in terms of hiring, promotion, salary, and administrative appointments. A recent study at McGill, my university, shows unhappily that this is true there — though I myself cannot complain.

Perhaps Caroline will give up the idea of a career and her crazy yen to be a hockey goalie, a jockey, or a baseball umpire. She may find fulfilment in marriage and disappear into the happily-ever-after. Or perhaps she will re-emerge some disenchanting morning, with a copy of Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* in one hand and an application for Women's Lib in the other.

Meanwhile, she will have had the privileges of citizenship — including the right to vote, accorded to women in America after World War I, not until 1940 in the Province of Quebec, and in Switzerland in 1971. But she has long had the privilege of paying equal taxes. Though it is unlikely that she got equal tax breaks. There are no arrangements for a deductible wife for women, even though it has clearly been recognized that every professional woman needs a wife.

As Caroline grows older, she will have to cope with questions of pension plan benefits, annuities and insurance policies, special medical deductions and retirement schemes. All this complexity might make her sympathize with the elderly widow from Vancouver who complained that computing the estate taxes gave her so much trouble that she was almost sorry her husband had died. And perhaps this is where, finally, the bonus is. If Caroline has played her role properly, she will have been protected from the hurly-burly of the world and she will inherit all the money her husband grew ulcers to make. You really can't wonder that nowadays Men's Liberation groups are beginning to form. They'll be needed as

long as the social expectations are so unfair; as long as men are forced into typically aggressive and competitive roles which they, as individuals, may not want to play; and as long as the situation can be exploited by wily women.

It is perfectly obvious that until people, all people, are permitted to grow up and define their identities in their own terms — not as adjuncts to someone else nor just as patterns in the social mosaic — no one will really be free. And it will only be when we truly allow for individual differences and worry less about roles that our heroine will stop being a girl and will become Caroline. I hope she makes it.