"We Ought to Obey God Rather Than Men": Obedience and the Development of Spiritually Inspired Independence in the Elsie Dinsmore Series

Rebekka A. Mehl

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Abstract

The Elsie Dinsmore series was a popular series for girls during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although this series has rarely been recognized for its progressive ideology, a critical examination of the books reveals that Martha Finley created a character, Elsie, whose independence as a woman is
deeply rooted in her conservative religious beliefs. This is contradictory to some modern assumptions about the relationship between religion and progressive ideology, but Elsie and her family depict a strong sense of female empowerment through religious faith.

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As the heroine of one of the most popular nineteenth-century series for girls, Jo March gave rise to new patterns of thinking about women and women’s roles, and Little Women (1868–69) has been lauded as fostering progressive thinking in young women. Kathryn Manson Tomasek, for instance, refers to the novel as “a site of feminist utopian thought” (237). In contrast, the Elsie Dinsmore series by Martha Finley, also one of the most popular series written for girls in the nineteenth century, has not been praised for being forward-thinking or liberating to women. The Elsie series is a set of twenty-eight books published between 1867 and 1905. I have chosen to limit my discussion to the first six volumes, published between 1867 and 1877. These six books, Elsie Dinsmore (1867), Elsie’s Holidays at Roseland (1868), Elsie’s Girlhood (1872), Elsie’s Womanhood (1875), Elsie’s Motherhood (1876), and Elsie’s Children (1877), cover the childhoods of both Elsie and her children. The Elsie books are generally disregarded as didactic and sentimental and are considered too old-fashioned for modern sensibilities. However, a critical examination of Elsie’s life and faith highlights that she and her daughters (both literal and figurative) possess a sense of independence that is inspired by their religious faith and which demonstrates a shift in thinking regarding women’s identity and independence.

A number of scholars have discussed the Elsie Dinsmore series. For example, Jackie E. Stallcup’s article, “Stamping the Coin of Character: Elsie Dinsmore and the Power of Christian Wealth,” reviews the cultural relevance of the books, discussing Elsie’s powerful economic position. Joe Sutliff Sanders, in Disciplining Girls: Understanding the Origins of the Classic Orphan Girl Story, discusses the progression of the use of affective discipline in this genre from the beginning of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth. Although he never discusses the Elsie Dinsmore books, he does highlight the challenges of discussing the shifting patterns of authority during this time period. Sanders’s conclusions would actually suggest that Finley was ahead of her time, since not

Rebekka A. Mehl recently received a Ph.D. from Western Michigan University and teaches for University of Phoenix.
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