

A Conservative Christian Girl's Girl: Elsie Dinsmore as a Model Then and Now

The best-selling *Elsie Dinsmore* series, dismissively categorized as “girls fiction” by Nina Baym (296) and characterized as “deservedly neglected” by John Seelye, is a conservative Christian work with clear political power, both upon initial nineteenth and early twentieth century publication and upon its late twentieth century republications. The series has been widely ignored, dismissed, and derided. Nevertheless, as LuElla D’Amico points out in “What would Elsie Do?: Educating Young Women About Moral and Academic Power in Martha Finley’s Nineteenth-Century *Elsie Dinsmore* Series,” “The book has remained in use in the contemporary college classroom, the nineteenth-century schoolroom, Sunday Schools past and present, and the contemporary home-school setting” (n pag).

I introduce what are widely recognized as the racist, patriarchal, abusive politics of the series, as well as its particular Christian aim. I analyze a key scene in the first book in which Elsie refuses her father’s command that she play the piano on Sunday, both to illustrate and complicate the political perspective of the series. I then analyze its reception with particular attention to the relationship between its reception and its both liberatory and oppressive political potential. I argue that both the popularity of the books and their critical fate result from an oversimplified understanding of their political potential, concluding that the problematic overlap of religion and politics has limited literary critical analysis of conservative Christian children’s literature as exemplified by the *Elsie* series.

Works cited (abstract)

Baym, Nina. *Women’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-70*. 2nd ed. U of Illinois P. Urbana. 1993.

D’Amico, LuElla. “What would Elsie Do?: Educating Young Women About Moral and Academic Power in Martha Finley’s Nineteenth-Century *Elsie Dinsmore* Series,” *Children’s Literature in Education*. Springer. Online. May 5, 2018.

Seelye, John. “Painful Matters: The Wide, Wide Underworld in Warner’s Story and it’s Sequel, *Elsie Dinsmore*.” *Children’s Literature Review*. v 148. Gale, 2005.