

Glass Combat Boots

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In fairy tales, moral conduct is always gendered. When Cinderella's mother dies and her new stepmother forces her into humiliating servitude, Cinderella is neither resentful nor vindictive. She retains her faith in the future while gracefully accepting her altered status. By contrast, Cinderlad, the male counterpart to Cinderella, leaves home to find a better life for himself. In some versions of the tale, he kills the stepmother before setting off on his adventures. With the help of borrowed magic, he demonstrates his courage and skill to a foreign princess, whom he then marries. Whereas Cinderlad befriends, bargains, and bluffs his way to a princely reward, Cinderella prevails by suffering sweetly. Her refusal to become like her oppressors is the measure of her feminine integrity; in the end, the domestic tasks she performs bring her glory not because household labor is inherently impressive but because she was unchanged by the ugliness of her condition. Eventually, her nobility, goodness, and innocence are rewarded by the otherwise negligent fairy godmother, who provides Cinderella with the magical glass slippers that enable the local prince to recognize her hidden worth.

In "Moral Education in the 'Badlands,'" Fran Schrag offers a solution to the double standard that requires Cinderella to suffer uncomplainingly while Cinderlad fights for the life he wants. Although Schrag frames the issues in terms of war and corruption rather than gender/sex inequality, it seems fair to extrapolate from his argument that Cinderella is going to need more than glass slippers to get through life. Glass slippers are great for the royal ball, and may be appropriate for the round of daily life with the prince, but until that privileged life is assured (and surely it could be disrupted at any moment), Cinderella is going to need a pair of glass combat boots. If we were to pursue that analogy, I think we might find that Cinderella prefers the boots and is not, after all, quite so interested in either the prince or the dancing slippers, but in this version of the story Cinderella wears her glass slippers as long as times are good, while also keeping her glass combat boots polished and ready. If she has children, she teaches them to move gracefully in their slippers and determinedly in their boots.

Ideally, Schrag argues, parents educate their children to trust, respect, and work cooperatively with others. There is a kind of transparency and grace in such moral relations. Because we value and honor the humanity of ourselves and others, we do not assume that others' well-being may be set aside, that their interests may be subordinated to ours, or, conversely, that they seek to harm us. Yet because such ideals can cost us our lives if others do not reciprocate, it is understandable if good people, when confronted with evil or aggression, set aside their principles for the sake of survival. By framing the question of morality in response to evil as an *educational* issue, however, Schrag seeks to make a stronger case than that which merely permits the use of deception or force under dire straits. If Cinderella gets her

dancing slippers muddy, an ethicist taking the latter position would acknowledge but regret that sometimes one has little choice but to walk through mud. However, Schrag does not see morally dirty hands and feet as rare occurrences. Living in a war zone, he says, is “far from unusual in many parts of the world.” For those living in war zones, “moral virtues adapted to peacetime conditions are luxuries.” Because parents “owe it to their children’s humanity that *their* natural trust and candor” not be used against them, they must *teach* them “the skills and dispositions needed to respond to attackers with force or guile” (emphasis in original). At the same time, he argues, it is important to inculcate in children — even children in dire jeopardy — a moral outlook that will enable them to trust the right people at the right time. When selectively used, the “moral virtues adapted to peacetime conditions,” as Schrag calls them, are also practical values of survival for the hunted and persecuted, allowing children to identify potential allies.

Thus, Schrag uses the categorical innocence of children as a lever to reframe as a specifically educational question the longstanding deontological/utilitarian debate about meeting unethical conduct with force, theft, or deception. Sidestepping the issue of personal moral integrity, he argues that what is at stake is whether one can allow children to be victims in the name of keeping them morally pure. “There may be something noble about a person who, though fully capable of retaliating, *decides* not” to do so, Schrag acknowledges, but “there is nothing noble about an innocent victim who...has no choice but to” allow himself to be victimized (emphasis in original). This sidelining of questions of integrity is in keeping with both justice- and care-based moral traditions. As Immanuel Kant pointed out, concern for one’s own integrity may be a form of self-indulgence, focusing more on one’s status as a virtuous person than on what is right. Caring theorists would argue that fetishizing our integrity evades the complex demands of relationships.

Indeed, Schrag’s shift in moral focus from the solitary, principled moral agent to the agent-as-parent-in-relation is reminiscent of Carol Gilligan’s *In a Different Voice*, in which girls objected to the formulaic framing of the Heinz dilemma in terms that obscured complex relational and social questions.¹ Like Carol Gilligan, Nel Noddings, and other theorists of educational caring, Schrag foregrounds adult moral responsibility for the flourishing of children; unlike caring theorists, however, he maintains a rights-and-justice-based framework as the ideal. Within that framework, the argument for a moral obligation to teach children in “the badlands” the dispositions and skills necessary for confrontation, deception, evasion, and manipulation gives moral clearance to the wearing of combat boots against oppression. Like Cinderella’s magical glass slippers, the glass combat boots worn by children in a war zone are kept from shattering by their wearers’ perfect innocence.

Interesting as Schrag’s argument is, it relies on a troubling assumption that peace is the normal social condition. “Unless war is interminable,” writes Schrag, “sooner or later peace will again prevail.” It depends on what you mean by “peace.” In the PBS documentary *The Civil War*, Ken Burns introduces the crisis of the Civil War against a backdrop of serenity. “In 1861, most of the nation’s thirty-one million people lived peaceably on farms and in small towns,” the film’s narrator intones.

Without apparent irony, he goes on to note that “Steamboats filled with cotton came and went at Vicksburg on the Mississippi.”² That some people prospered, however, does not mean that the United States was not already a war zone in which Mexican and indigenous land was being seized, most blacks were enslaved, many people lived in desperate poverty, and suffrage was denied to all but a few voters. By the same token, the “well-functioning, gang-free communities” to which Schrag refers do not represent a universal norm temporarily denied to people outside those communities. On the contrary, this “over-privileged” life is achieved at the *expense* of most of the rest of the world.³ In real life, what counts as morality — and what is recognized as peace — articulates with race, class, gender/sexuality, and nation status. Education for peacetime “has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples,” as Carter G. Woodson pointed out. “The philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching.”⁴ The moral education suited to peacetime conditions thus must be interrogated in terms of whose peace is secured, at what cost, and with what accompanying moral ignorance.

Even as an ideal, the notion of peace prevailing under more or less normal conditions is static, oblivious to the work required to maintain it. Students and teachers engaged in anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-sexist, and other anti-oppressive work often assume that the goal of our work is to institute a world in which oppression no longer exists. But bringing about equality, peace, respect, and openness to others is an ongoing struggle; there will always be exploitation, entitlement, and dishonesty — including our own — but there also will always be struggle against oppression. Insofar as we think of morality as an ideal with legitimate deviations, we juxtapose glass slippers with glass combat boots. But work for love and justice does not lead to a glass-slipper finale. We will always have work zones. They will involve dangerous confrontations, exhaustion, chapped hands, bruised feelings, and bleak consciences. *And* we will have the delight, exhilaration, and connection of the dance.

1. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

2. *The Civil War*, “Episode 1: The Cause,” DVD, directed by Ken Burns (1990; Alexandria, Va.: PBS Home Video, 2004).

3. Tim Wise, “Beyond ‘Diversity’: Challenging Racism in an Age of Backlash” (lecture, uVoices Social Justice Speaker Series, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, March 11, 2009).

4. Carter Godwin Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933; repr., Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1972), xii.