Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies

Volume 2 | Issue 1 Article 6

5-1-2011

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Bianca Marcus
University of Western Ontario

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Recommended Citation
Marcus, Bianca (2011) "A Single Woman: Rebellion Against and Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles in The Exorcist," *Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol2/iss1/6

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Abstract
No abstract provided.

Keywords
feminist film theory, gender roles, conservatism

This article is available in Kino: The Western Undergraduate Journal of Film Studies: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/kino/vol2/iss1/6

A Single Woman: Rebellion Against and Reinforcement of Traditional Gender Roles in *The Exorcist*
by Bianca Marcus

Single motherhood is a risky profession, in more ways than one. Traditional gender norms—upheld in Western culture by generations of habit and a deeply rooted sense of misogyny—dictate that a woman should put her children and husband ahead of herself. She should care for their needs and wants, sacrificing her own in the process, in an effort to uphold the "natural" order and balance of the nuclear family and home. While the father figure is expected to provide for the family's financial and material needs, the mother figure is depended upon for love, affection, and nurturing. When a wife and husband separate, however, traditional roles are upset. The woman is no longer under the dominion of her husband and must, out of necessity, take on traits and responsibilities traditionally held by a man. Once separated from her male partner, it is the woman who must "wear the pants" in a household. In her doing so, the domestic "balance" can no longer be maintained, and the female must deal with the fallout of this loss of balance. Glossing over many of the practical challenges that can face women raising children on their own, *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) chooses instead to depict graphically the social and spiritual consequences of a woman's decision to step outside of her traditionally accepted role as full-time wife and mother. *The Exorcist* takes a conservative standpoint on this subject, focusing on the punishment Chris MacNeil (Ellen Burstyn) is dealt for her decision to maintain a career outside of the home. Although she still keeps one foot strongly in her role as mother, this is not enough to absolve her of her moral transgression; by stepping out of her traditional role, the damage has already been done. This essay will discuss the consequences for the female's departure from cultural and traditional norms as played out in *The Exorcist*, and will examine specifically the impact these consequences have on Chris MacNeil, her daughter Regan (Linda Blair), and the changing relationship between the two characters.

The opening segment of *The Exorcist* is set in Iraq, during an intense archaeological dig. Like a male obstetrician reaching into a woman's vaginal opening to aid in delivering her child, we see Father Merrin (Max von Sydow) reach into a womb-like cavern in the earth to produce an ominous artifact - the carved head of a demon-like being. Thus, evil as depicted in this film is born of a feminine source. As the film progresses, evil gradually becomes less of an external force and more of an internal one; it is not found in any object, but comes to be hosted by a human. Regan, the offspring of Chris and a product of her womb, becomes the host for the evil in the film; Chris, therefore, is the source of the evil.

With her androgynous name, masculine pantsuits, short haircut and full-time career, Chris is painted as having more stereotypically male than female qualities. She does not express a desire to bring a new male partner into her life, and dismisses her relationship with Burke Dennings (Jack MacGowran)—at least, when she is speaking to Regan—as a simple friendship. Even the role of cooking breakfast is left to the family's hired female worker, Willi (Gina Petrushka). Chris is, for the purposes of the film, a stand-in for the family's father figure; indeed, she is the sole adult in the MacNeil home who works to provide for the family's financial needs. In discussions of the supernatural as metaphor, one might go so far as to compare Chris to the figure of the "witch": according to Edward J. Ingrebertsen, "witches are prototypically 'bad mothers,' evil because they demonstrate the failure of social form"

(103). Such women, "instead of nurturing children, steal them away for unspeakable reasons of their own"; Chris, similarly, has taken her daughters to Washington and away from their father and their hometown in order to further her own career.

As the film progresses, however, Chris' struggle with Regan's drastic behavioural change causes her to rely increasingly on the knowledge and advice of males such as Doctor Klein (Barton Heyman) and Father Karras (Jason Miller). Her body language, when she speaks to them, communicates fear and submission; her manner of dress becomes increasingly covered-up. She begins to wear a scarf on her head, creating a parallel between Chris and the religious statue of Mary we see are shown in the film. Chris rarely opposes the advice of male professionals, going so far as to allow Regan to undergo bloody and unusual tests at their behest. She listens attentively to Doctor Klein, entertaining his suggestion that her separation from her husband may be the cause of Regan's "[d]isorder of the nerves." Chris defers to these males, since she evidently cannot solve the problems plaguing her own child. Her attempts at submissive femininity are futile, however; for such are the consequences that she must face because of her status as a single mother. She must now rely on male outsiders to cure her daughter. Since she has relinquished her traditional role as full-time mother and wife, Chris is rendered helpless and ineffective as caregiver to her child. The film's status as evidence of "the failure of traditional filmic methods of amelioration," characteristic of several films made in the 1970s (ie. *Taxi Driver* [Martin Scorsese, 1975] and *Halloween* [John Carpenter, 1978]), is paralleled by its depiction of the breakdown of the nuclear family (Fitzmaurice 152). Like these films, *The Exorcist* deals with "the idea of a powerful force - the demonic - invading American middle-class life" (of which gender roles in the nuclear family play a significant part) "tearing its security to pieces" (151).

At the beginning of the film, Regan is the ideal daughter: she is both child and friend to Chris, kind and impish, considerate and a jokester. Once Regan begins to feel and say things that are out of her control (for example, experiencing her bed shaking with no obvious source causing it, and uncharacteristically cursing during her medical examination), an indication of the onset of puberty, she no longer desires the same type of closeness and friendship with her mother. Twelve-year-old Regan—or, more precisely, some seemingly satanic force within her—wants to break free of the "natural" hierarchy set out by commonly-held notions of the family in which the child submits to his or her parent. Regan thus becomes a rebellious young person. While rebellion against a parent or parents is typical behaviour for the hormonally-charged pubescent adolescent, in the case of *The Exorcist* such rebellion is depicted as abnormal and monstrous.

Regan further rebels against societal norms by upsetting the established male-female hierarchy and her gender role as a female. Once possessed, she becomes "a troubled adolescent"; she "misses her absent father and is at odds with her mother" (Ingrebretsen 102). In the fashion of a stereotypical pubescent young person, Regan exhibits her uncontrollable sexuality in startling ways. Regan's behaviour is more demonstrative than that of a typical teen: she "tries to fuck her mother," "knocks men to the floor with one punch, tries to castrate a priest, murders two men, and... masturbates with a crucifix" (Creed 31). Regan is punished for her rebellion by becoming possessed by the spirit of the devil, and Chris is punished by having to experience the drastic and horrifying transformation of her beloved

daughter. In Regan's case, her possession "becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, [and] abject"; a relationship is established between "feminine desire, sexuality and abjection" (31). Like Chris, Regan crosses the lines of gender norms; since she is "invaded by a personality of another sex," her "transgression is... abject because gender boundaries are violated" (32). To further establish Regan's situation as self-inflicted, director Friedkin has explained that "when choosing [Blair's] makeup for the film, he thought that her disfiguration should come from something she did to herself" (Briefel 21). This suggests that Regan had some personal agency in allowing her condition to take place and take over her mind and body.

Like her mother, even Regan's name is androgynous. Her namesake, one of the daughters in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, further reinforces the supposedly evil nature of Regan's transgressions. Regan the Shakespeare character is described as "'sharper than a serpent's tooth,'"; thus, "through her name, Regan is associated with the snake, Christian symbol of woman's disobedience, unbridled sexual appetite and treachery" (Creed 33). Neither Chris nor Regan have any known spiritual beliefs; Chris tells one of the doctors attempting to treat Regan's case as much. In addition to transgressing gender hierarchy, Chris and Regan have also thus transgressed against Western society's traditional religious bent towards Christianity. In his essay "'The Only "I" in the World': Religion, Psychoanalysis, and 'The Dybbuk'," Ira Konigsberg explains that *The Exorcist* is "a response to the secularization of Christianity and society in general" (Konigsberg 31). This, too, is related to gender - in traditional Christianity, males are considered to be the "head" of their female counterparts. Chris and Regan defy this hierarchy.

As a conservative film, *The Exorcist* depicts rebellious women who transgress the boundaries of culturally-implemented gender roles and norms. Instead of uplifting Chris and Regan as positively independent, successful individuals, the film shows these women to be conduits of evil, responsible for upsetting the "natural" order of female versus male roles in the nuclear family and society. Whether in the home, the workplace, or religion, both women have stepped outside their traditional roles and must thus suffer the consequences of their transgressions. A reactionary film made at the height of second-wave feminism, *The Exorcist* comes with a warning: single motherhood and female independence are not only dangerous, but are the source of the evil at work in destroying both the nuclear family and long-held cultural, social, and moral values in America.

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