

George Eliot on Stage and Screen

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Certain Victorian novelists have a significant 'afterlife' in stage and screen adaptations of their work: the Brontës in numerous film versions of Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and of Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Dickens in Lionel Bart's musical *Oliver!*, or the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Nicholas Nickleby*—and so on.¹ Let me give a more detailed example. My interest in adaptations of Victorian novels dates from seeing Roman Polanski's film *Tess* of 1979. I learned in the course of work for a piece on this adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* of 1891 that there had been a number of stage adaptations, including one by Hardy himself which had a successful professional production in London in 1925, as well as amateur 'out of town' productions. In Hardy's lifetime (he died in 1928), there was an opera, produced at Covent Garden in 1909; and two film versions, in 1913 and 1924; together with others since.² Here is an index to or benchmark of the variety and frequency of adaptations of another Victorian novelist than George Eliot.

It is striking that George Eliot hardly has an 'afterlife' in such mediations. The question, 'why is this so?', is perplexing to say the least, and one for which I have no satisfactory answer. The classic problem for film adaptations of novels is how to deal with narrative standpoint, focalisation, and authorial commentary, and a reflex answer might hypothesise that George Eliot's narrators pose too great a challenge. It seems to me that to rest content in such a position is to be dogmatic about the issue of adaptation generally, and in particular arrogant about the primacy of the literary text, though obviously the issue of narrative point of view

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is unavoidable.³ I have some tentative suggestions about the relative neglect of George Eliot: one of them has to do with the low proportion of dialogue in a George Eliot text, compared say to Jane Austen or Dickens; another to do with the iridescence of her characterisation. But Hardy—some of whose plots can be directly compared with George Eliot's (most obviously *Tess* and *Adam Bede*)—has been comprehensively filmed; so has Thackeray (*Vanity Fair* at least), and so has Henry James (the past decade has seen a Merchant-Ivory production of *The Golden Bowl* (2000), Iain Softley's *The Wings of the Dove* and Agnieszka Holland's *Washington Square* (both 1997), and Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996)).

Although I subscribe to the view that George Eliot's texts are no longer identified with a person or an authorial persona 'George Eliot' once they are in circulation, I want to spend a little time with the biographical George Eliot, especially her own experience of theatre and attitudes towards adaptation. I begin with a brief account of her interest in theatre, to establish her wide experience of a range of dramatic modes, from pantomime through to classical drama. We tend to assume that George Eliot was relentlessly highbrow, and that her love of music dominated her engagement with the sister arts. Not so. When she went to a pantomime in 1862, she wrote whimsically to her friend Sara Hennell, 'Ah, what I should have felt in my real child-days, to have been let into the further history of Mother Hubbard and her Dog!'⁴ She took care to ensure that younger generations did not lack such opportunities, frequently treating the children of friends to an outing to the theatre.

Her pleasure in theatrical entertainment was a drastic shift from her attitude during her youthful evangelical phase, when she refused to accompany her brother Isaac to the theatre during her first visit to London in 1838. Instead she stayed in their lodgings reading Josephus's *History of the Jews*.⁵ By 1845, however, her resistance had melted, and she recounted a visit to Birmingham 'to see Macready act Brutus! I was not disappointed on the whole, and it was a real treat, notwithstanding a ranting Cassius and a fat, stumpy Caesar and a screeching Calpurnia'.⁶ She began to go

regularly to the theatre after she went to live in London in the 1850s, attending both high- and low-brow productions, sometimes in company with Herbert Spencer, and later with George Lewes (with whom she was to live from 1854 to his death in 1878). Lewes exercised a profound influence on George Eliot in many ways, in respect of the theatre especially because of his involvement as playwright, drama critic, and actor. At times he urged her to write on theatre, prompting the publisher Blackwood to seek, unsuccessfully, 'a Theatrical Article from you at Christmas' 1860;⁷ and at times he also proposed that she write plays.

One possibility raised early in 1864 was that she write a script as a vehicle for their friend, the well-known actress Helen Faucit. A fragmentary outline of three acts of 'Savello' appears to have been drafted by Lewes about that time, perhaps as an incentive to George Eliot.⁸ (This is the phantom conjured up by Amanda Cross in her 1997 short story, 'The George Eliot Play'.)⁹ The scheme did not come to anything, however, although George Eliot was experimenting with dramatic form at the time. By September 1864, she was '*trying a drama on a subject that has fascinated me*' (G.E.'s italics),¹⁰ which eventually turned out to be the so-called verse drama *The Spanish Gypsy* of 1868.

George Eliot continued a keen theatre-goer to the very end of her life, taking a chill during a performance of *Agamemnon* given in Greek by Oxford undergraduates on 17 December 1880: she died on 22 December. Her widower John Cross, intent on memorialising her as high-minded, reported of this fatal outing that 'The representation was a great enjoyment—an exciting stimulus—and my wife proposed that during the winter we should read together some of the great Greek dramas'.¹¹

My point then is that George Eliot had a broad exposure to theatrical performance, as well as a wide and deep knowledge of dramatic literature, and a degree of professional knowledge of the theatre. She also at times reflected on issues to do with adaptation: for example, in her correspondence in 1862 with the artist Frederic Leighton about his illustrations for the *Cornhill* serialisation of *Romola*. This is an interesting correspondence in various respects—for the exchange of scholarly detail about Florence; for George

Eliot's comments on her own work, and for her statements about the relation of her text to Leighton's visual representations of it.¹² For example:

I am quite convinced that illustrations can only form a sort of overture to the text. The artist who uses the pencil must otherwise be tormented to misery by the deficiencies or requirements of the one who uses the pen, and the writer, on the other hand, must die of impossible expectations.¹³

I take George Eliot here to be acknowledging equal and different imperatives for artists in visual and verbal media, rather than subscribing to a hierarchy which privileges the written word.

What of requests to dramatise her works? George Eliot was emphatic in her refusal to countenance theatrical adaptations of her writings. In October 1879 W. L. Bicknell (author of *Sunday Snowdrops*, 1874) wrote asking for permission to dramatise *Romola*. She declined stiffly:

Dear Sir

You will no doubt on reflection appreciate as well as imagine the reasons that must prevent a writer who cares much about his writings from willingly allowing them to be modified and in any way 'adapted' by another mind than his own.¹⁴

Within a few months: 'I can have nothing whatever to do with the adaptation of my work to the stage, and I must decline to have my name connected with any such adaptation', she wrote, to quash hopes of performing *Daniel Deronda*,¹⁵ though Lewes had played with the idea in April 1878: 'Sketched a scene and characters for stage version of *Deronda*'.¹⁶

There were none the less adaptations in Eliot's lifetime, which are difficult to track because they are often retitled. J. E. Carpenter's *Adam Bede* for the Surrey Theatre in 1862 declared its unauthorised affiliation with George Eliot's novel, however, he then rewrote the plot. The scandals of premarital sex and child murder are totally defused. Dinah Morris is reduced to the role of Hetty's confidante, and the question of Hetty's guilt and repentance evaporates when she turns out 'to be guilty of nothing—the dead child was not hers at all, but belonged to gypsies, and Arthur

Donnithorne, as the audience learns just before the final curtain, was married to her all along!’— but felt constrained to conceal his marriage to conserve his inheritance.¹⁷

The only adaptation tacitly acknowledged by George Eliot was by Sir William Gilbert, *Dan’l Druce, Blacksmith*. On 27 September, 1876, Lewes noted in his journal: ‘In the evening private box at the Haymarket to see *Dan’l Druce*, a piece partly founded on “Silas Marner.” Wretched stuff, poorly acted’.¹⁸ Gilbert varies the motif of redemption through a lost child that echoes throughout *Silas Marner* by having the Silas figure turn out in fact to be the biological father of Dorothy. The adaptation, like Carpenter’s *Adam Bede*, in some measure sanitises George Eliot’s text as it dispels suggestions of illicit sex—though in fact Godfrey Cass has been married to Eppie’s mother. (Gilbert of course was adept in ‘the well-timed revelation of a long-concealed identity’.)¹⁹

As it happens, *Silas Marner* is the most frequently adapted of Eliot’s works. There was a stage version, anonymous and apparently unauthorised, produced at Sheffield in 1871 under the title *Effie’s Angel*; one by Steele MacKaye in 1876; and perhaps half a dozen others, mostly recitations or versions specifically for amateur dramatic societies, down to Geoffrey Beevers’s in 1998. It is also the only one of George Eliot’s works as far as I know to have formed the basis for an opera, produced in Cape Town in 1961.²⁰ A ‘musical drama’ by Howard Goodall was produced at the Salisbury Festival in 1993; and Storm Productions put on *Silas Marner the Musical* in London late in 2000. A brief digression: as far as operatic adaptations are concerned, there is a great ‘might have been’, because in the last year of his life (1892–93), Tchaikovsky made notes for a scenario for an opera based on *Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story*, the second of George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life*.²¹

The film starring Ben Kingsley is probably the most successful adaptation of *Silas Marner*. A 1985 co-production of the BBC and Arts & Entertainment Network, it was directed by Giles Foster and produced by Louis Marks who jointly wrote the script. The film was made in six weeks on location in the Cotswolds and Derbyshire, and is notable for its close adherence to George Eliot’s

text as well as for intelligent filmcraft. Foster and Marks indicated for instance that at one time they considered doing away with the Lantern Yard material but decided that it was necessary to show how and why Silas came to Raveloe. Giles Foster commented: 'funny ... that it wasn't made years ago in Hollywood with Shirley Temple'.²² After a fashion, it had been: Temple played the Eppie role in *Little Miss Marker* (Universal, 1934), based on a Damon Runyon story in which a cynical gambler is forced to adopt a little girl, with beneficial consequences. Incidentally, this is probably the most dramatised of Runyon's works; just as *Little Lord Fauntleroy* is of Frances Hodgson Burnett's. The motif, common to both, of a crusty old man's being redeemed by a child, is the stuff of fairytale—and here I think is the key to the frequency of adaptation of *Silas Marner*. This short work has a single narrative line, unlike George Eliot's usual multi-plot novels; and its narrative works less through narratorial commentary than is customary with George Eliot. The plot depends heavily on doublings and contrasts, drawing on parable as well as fairytale and melodrama, and hence is relatively amenable to dramatic adaptations.

There have been film versions of *Silas Marner* both before and since that of 1985. It was the first of George Eliot's works to be filmed, by D. W. Griffith, no less, in 1909, as *A Fair Exchange* (the cast included Mack Sennett). In the early days of the movies, there were many one-reelers made from famous, or favourite, nineteenth-century texts: Griffith was a notable exponent, making *Pippa Passes*, among others, and the reverence of Griffith and Eisenstein for Dickens's narrative techniques is legendary. Three more versions of *Silas Marner* followed in 1911, 1913 and 1916; then there was a BBC-TV serial in six episodes in 1964, an animated version in 1983, and a French one, *Les Liens du Coeur*, in 1996. A Steve Martin film of 1994, *A Simple Twist of Fate* (Touchstone Pictures/Buena Vista, directed by Gillies MacKinnon, written by Steve Martin) was loosely based on the novel. The Silas figure is a reclusive cabinet-maker, while the real father of the child that wanders into his isolated homestead is a local politico, who eventually attempts to claim his child by legal action, so leading to consideration of the true nature of 'family' ties.

Let me say something of the fortunes of other of George Eliot's works on stage and screen. Perhaps surprisingly, her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, has had a number of adaptations. There was a moderately successful stage production at the Q Theatre, Richmond (UK), in 1927, dramatised by Lydia Lewisohn and Lily Tobias. The *Morning Post* review called it 'a well-built and moving play', offering the assurance that there was no need to be Jewish to enjoy this 'sincere portrayal of the complexity and difficulty of human relationships'.²³ By this time there had already been two film versions, one American, in 1914, entitled *Gwendolyn*, and one British, in 1921. The latter begins with Alcharisi entrusting her twelve-year-old son Daniel to Sir Hugo Mallinger for his education; and ends with Grandcourt shooting at Deronda after Gwendolen has confessed to her husband her love for the other man. He misses Deronda but hits Gwendolen, who dies, and Grandcourt then turns the gun on himself. Deronda and Mirah are married. In essence, it appears that the storyline is made cruder (in respect of Gwendolen's relationship to Daniel), and correspondingly Daniel's relationship to Judaism more sentimental. A review concludes that 'Although George Eliot is not ideally suited to the screen, the producer of this picture, with a poor scenario, has made a film that possesses high technical value'.²⁴ Finally, there was a television adaptation in 1970, which was both memorable and, while emphasising the Gwendolen plot over the Jewish plot, stayed relatively close to George Eliot's text. An early BBC-TV colour serial, in six episodes, it was adapted by Alexander Baron, with Robert Hardy—Mr Brooke in the 1994 *Middlemarch*—as Grandcourt, and Martha Henry—who became a major figure on the Canadian stage—as Gwendolen. A new adaptation is scheduled for release on British television late in 2002.

There have also been several film versions of *The Mill on the Floss*, two silents in 1913 and 1915, then in 1937 what was presumably the first George Eliot 'talkie'. *Today's Cinema* said it had 'a cast which reads like a "Who's Who" of British screen production',²⁵ including Geraldine Fitzgerald as Maggie (her performance was widely praised in terms such as 'vital yet

sensitive'),²⁶ and James Mason as Tom. Directed by Tim Whelan for Morgan Productions and the British Lion Film Corporation, the script was written by the poet John Drinkwater, who modified the ending to have Philip and Maggie drown when he goes to warn her of the approaching flood. My guess is that this apparently gratuitous rewriting serves to establish Philip as Maggie's true love, removing the suggestive connotations of her drowning in her brother's embrace. The film simplifies Maggie's turbulent emotional life to concentrate on family feuds. Much effort and expense were directed towards local colour, historical authenticity, and expensive sets; there was general praise for the 'meritorious period settings' and the 'thrilling spectacle of storm and flood and dam burst' at the end.²⁷ An abridged version was issued in 1953. There have also been a Mexican *Mill*; a BBC Scotland television serial in four episodes in 1965, starring Jane Asher; Margaret Wolfit's one-woman stage version performed from at least 1973; and a 'made-for-television' version in 1998 (Carnival Films/BBC, directed by Graham Theakston with Pippa Gard as Maggie).

The Mill on the Floss has also had stage productions. A version of it was produced in Nuneaton in 1919 for the centenary of George Eliot's birth, and it provides the basis for a number of texts written for amateur dramatic societies. A new approach to adapting George Eliot emerged in the 1990s: essentially non-naturalistic stage versions, influenced by the work of such companies as Théâtre de Complicité. The earliest is Geoffrey Beevers's adaptation of *Adam Bede* (1990), where he tackled the problem of representing the authorial voice by sharing it among the cast, attributing a passage of omniscient narration to an appropriate character, who delivered that speech directly to the audience so as to offer immediate insights on the action.

Later in date, though both playwright and company had other relevant adaptations including *War and Peace* to their credit, is a much-acclaimed *The Mill on the Floss*, made by Helen Edmundson in 1994 for the Ipswich-based Shared Experience Theatre Company. This version tackles creatively the problems of omniscient and interiorised narration. At some points the whole cast appears as a crowd or chorus wordlessly externalising the

tensions George Eliot presents in authorial commentary: at times they verbalise commentary. Edmundson also used the device of having Maggie played by three actors (First, Second, Third Maggie: child, adolescent, young woman) to project the character's struggles and self-doubt. In both Beevers's and Edmundson's adaptations, actors double roles, in part for economy, but to telling effect: Beevers commented that 'Hetty's hangman could almost be Arthur',²⁸ and in *The Mill*, Maggie's father and the father-figure of Dr Kenn are played by the same actor, as are her champions Bob Jakin and Philip Wakem (this actor also does the kindly but ineffectual Uncle Pullet). Edmundson's version is condensed, but not unduly simplified, and brings out strongly Maggie's internal conflicts and the ways these are caused in part by the restrictions on women in her community.

To summarise other adaptations. All the major works except *Middlemarch* have been filmed at least once. (There has been no film of *Middlemarch*, though there have been television serialisations.) There appears to have been only one attempt at *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a 1920 version of the second 'scene', *Mr Gilfil's Love-Story*; and one attempt at *Felix Holt* (1915). There were versions of *Adam Bede* in 1915 and 1918. A letter of protest from novelist and war correspondent F. Tennyson Jesse, a great-niece of the poet Tennyson, was published in the London *Times* on 19 December 1918: 'Sir,—Is there no way of protecting the masterpieces of English fiction from the onslaughts of kinema companies?' Hetty's child does not die, but is rescued by gypsies—who conveniently arrive at the foot of the gallows just in time to save her, having seen Arthur's notices offering a reward. The film ends with a double wedding of Arthur and Hetty, Adam and Dinah. Just as in the 1862 stage *Adam Bede*, and the 1937 film of *The Mill on the Floss*, the script absolves the characters of immorality, thus diluting the complexity of the novel. A different kind of violation, of a formal kind, is evident in the 1992 BBC/WGBH Boston film of *Adam Bede*, which opened with Hetty's trial, thus at a stroke revealing much of the plot. Adapted by Maggie Wardley, produced by Peter Goodchild and directed by Giles Foster, with Patsy Kensit as Hetty and Robert Stephens as

Irwine, it paid considerable attention to authenticity in settings and dialect, and appears not to have attracted great attention.

The 1994 television serial of *Middlemarch* (there had been an earlier BBC-TV *Middlemarch* in seven episodes in 1968) was a different matter.²⁹ Probably the most popular adaptation of any of George Eliot's works in any medium, and certainly a marketing phenomenon, it was a lavish co-production of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Boston, Mass., Public Broadcasting System, with script by Andrew Davies, Anthony Page as director and Louis Marks as producer, and a budget of over £6 million for its six episodes (about six and a half hours viewing). Its ratings in the United Kingdom were high, and in one week the novel topped the paperback bestseller list. The scriptwriter Andrew Davies proclaimed to the London *Evening Standard* 'a private and arrogant conviction that, in some ways, a dramatic adaptation might actually enhance the story'.³⁰ (Remember that this man was to show us Fitzwilliam Darcy with his shirt off in the 1995 BBC-TV serial of *Pride and Prejudice*.)

I see this *Middlemarch* as an intelligent conservative 'reading' of the novel for John Major's Britain. It took its bearings from George Eliot's text in at least two significant ways. The first is the famous question posed by the narrator, 'why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one ... ?'³¹ The novel at once returns the answer 'No' in respect of Casaubon specifically, and by implication and demonstration in respect of others also. The series responds with an even more emphatic negative by its development of the points of view of others, particularly the young medical man Tertius Lydgate, a newcomer to Middlemarch. The second is the negotiation of the past with the present that is so much a subject of *Middlemarch* the novel, and becomes in *Middlemarch* the series an emphasis on progress and the future which is at once nostalgic and resigned. While much of the complexity of vision and judgement that derives in the novel from omniscient narration and free indirect discourse is absent from the screen, authorial commentary is incorporated into characters' speeches at times, or translated into visual imagery and detail. A nice transmutation from page to screen is supplied by Judi Dench's

appearance at the end as 'George Eliot', to deliver an abbreviated version of the 'Finale' before ascending the stairs with her books.

Both these adaptations of 1994, *The Mill on the Floss* on stage, and *Middlemarch* on television, engage the George Eliot texts respectfully but without undue deference, demonstrating the extent to which adaptation is best approached as transformative rather than purely recuperative. In the concluding section of this essay, I offer a more extended account of an earlier adaptation of a George Eliot text, the 1924 film of *Romola*, where again the conventions of the medium, silent film, work in productive dialogue with the novel.³² This is the second film version of *Romola*, the first an Italian one made in 1911 which appears to have vanished without trace. Surprisingly, a print of the 1924 *Romola*, directed by Henry King, produced by Inspiration Pictures and distributed by Metro-Goldwyn Corporation, can be bought from amazon.com.

George Eliot's fifth work of fiction, published in 1863, cost her untold pains in the writing: Cross reports her as saying 'I began it as a young woman,—I finished it an old woman'.³³ It has cost others untold pains in the reading: I quote Barbara Hardy's famous judgement, '*Romola* is undoubtedly a book which it is more interesting to analyse than simply to read'.³⁴ In *Romola*, George Eliot moved away from her family memories and the relatively recent English past to Savonarola's Florence, and a massively studied argument about the Renaissance. Some of her contemporaries, and many readers since, have deplored this shift. A more positive response is exemplified by R. H. Hutton in his *Spectator* review: 'The great artistic purpose of the story is to trace out the conflict between liberal culture and the more passionate form of the Christian faith in that strange era, which has so many points of resemblance with the present.'³⁵ In referring to George Eliot's negotiation of past and present, Hutton unwittingly hints at issues which Henry King also engages with in his projection of the United States immediately post-World War I onto a mid-nineteenth-century English version of late fifteenth-century Florence. Hutton incidentally is one of the many to praise the characterisation of Tito ('There is not a more wonderful piece of painting in English romance than this figure of Tito') and to

find the depiction of Romola less successful ('half-revealed and more suggested than fully painted').³⁶

A different critical vein was opened in the *Times* review, which commented that 'the heap of strange coincidences' aligned *Romola* with the current vogue for sensation fiction: 'are we to admire that in her which we criticize in others?'³⁷ The 'sensation' of novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) derived in plot terms from invasion of the domestic space by violence—arson, murder, bigamy—and *Romola* certainly exploits a number of such elements. Moreover, critical debate about *Romola* is driven by some of the same ideological concerns that circulate in discussion of sensation fiction. A proposition particularly relevant to readings of *Romola* is that sensation fiction, despite its subversion and critique of patriarchy, is ultimately conservative because without fail the patriarchal family, and hence the authority of the state, is valorised. As we shall see, for all the differences of the film from the novel, the criticisms of George Eliot's *Romola* that I have briefly rehearsed resonate in criticism of Henry King's film.

One question that is begged is why *Romola*, of all George Eliot's novels, should have been chosen for a major Hollywood film production? The particular popularity of *Romola* in the United States, from its first publication in 1863, may be a factor. American interest in *Romola* is usually attributed to the analogies to be drawn between the internecine rivalries in Savonarola's Florence, and the politics of the American Civil War. Certainly in significant ways the film speaks out of the political climate in the United States in the early 1920s. Successive Republican Presidents Harding and Coolidge were intent on law and order issues and the reform of administrative corruption. This pressure for family values and wholesomeness was applied in the film industry through the Hays Code, named after Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, Inc., which encouraged movie makers to conspire in an affirmative cultural vision in which objectionable material was neutralised. This said, most likely the appeal of *Romola* at a time when there was a vogue for costume epic was the opportunity to film a quality product in an

exotic locale, though it is remotely possible that a late nineteenth-century stage adaptation by Elwyn A. Barron may have had some influence on the decision. It toured extensively from the autumn of 1896 to the spring of 1897, beginning in Milwaukee, going as far west as San Francisco, as far south as New Orleans, and as far east as Philadelphia and Boston—but it did not play in New York.³⁸

To read the film as a text of *Romola* it is necessary to confront the major paradox that this is a silent film, George Eliot without words. There is limited and highly stylised use of language in the captions: for the most part we read images. The affinity of silent film with the classic realist narrative of many Victorian fictions is well recognised; and the plot of *Romola* is true to type. The equilibrium of the fictional world, disrupted at the outset, is finally restored in a process of cause and effect which is seen to depend in large measure on human agency. Characterisation, as well as narrative, is significant in silent film, developed through techniques like close-up which align the audience with a character's point of view.

In addition to this classic realist heritage, the affinity of silent film with stage melodrama has frequently been acknowledged.³⁹ In Henry King's *Romola*, there are some very explicit carryovers, especially the fight at sea (not recounted by George Eliot), which right on cue breaks out at the half-way mark in the evening's entertainment, following the practice in the nineteenth-century theatre, where the programme included various pieces, not only the principal feature. Other conventions of melodrama permeate the film, from the use of declamatory gesture by Savonarola in particular, to such omens as the black cat which crosses Tito's path as he heads towards what he thinks is safety in the climax of the film. These non-naturalistic modes of representation go along with insistence on verisimilitude in the Italian settings. The credits proclaim that the film's 'historical authenticity is attested by Dr Guido Biagi', Director of the Laurentian Library, Florence (who was also responsible for a two-volume *Romola* with copious 'Engravings of Scenes and Characters, selected by the Editor', published by the London house T. Fisher Unwin in 1907). The

dynamic here is less that of Jacobean drama and the Gothic novel of the late eighteenth century, where startling events are transposed to exotic locations, often Italian, than of the mid-nineteenth-century sensation novel, where dreadful events occur in familiar settings. The authenticity of the settings both impresses the audience and reassures them of the credibility of the action.

The Florentine setting is exploited at the beginning of the film, which moves from classic distant views of the Duomo into the streets of the city. The cinematography was favourably commented on in reviews:

An elaborate and beautiful rendering of George Eliot's fine story of 15th century Florentine love and politics. Pictorially, the production is superb ... Some cutting would increase the entertainment value of the film without marring its artistic quality ... most suitable, perhaps, for large better-class houses, but it is not 'high-brow'.⁴⁰

This review emphasises the quality of the camera work 'which has imparted to the whole production the delicate quality of a fine steel engraving', declaring *Romola* to be 'one of the most artistic pictures ever made by an American director'.⁴¹ The reaction of *Kinematograph Weekly* was not dissimilar, and curiously reminiscent of reviews of the novel:

This picture has more interest as a production than as an adaptation of George Eliot's novel. The shooting of scenes in Florence and Pisa and careful attention to costume and other period details has given it the fascination of a travelogue, the beauty of a faithful reproduction, but the treatment of the story is so uninspired that one wearies of it long before the end. Drastic cutting will be necessary if the picture is to appeal to the great majority.⁴²

It may be that the film was cut before distribution: the English print was 10,000 feet, the American nearly 13,000 feet.

Among the experiments with cinematography are special effects for the pirate attack at sea. This elaborate extended sequence runs about five minutes and involves much action. While it is tame compared to present-day equivalents, there is competent cutting from distant shots of ship models, fairly evidently in a tank, to men fighting fiercely on life-size sets. In a different vein, when *Romola* is recovering from injuries sustained in her attempt to

defend Savonarola against a mob, images of him are superimposed on her feverish face.

The cast requires comment. Both the *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Bioscope* reviews make special (favourable) mention of Herbert Grimwood's Savonarola. Where *Bioscope* is generally commendatory of the acting, *Kinematograph Weekly* in its lead review is more critical, observing that 'The acting is good, but not remarkable', and giving qualified praise to Lillian Gish in the title role ('a quiet, dignified performance ... at times so very restrained that the part becomes lifeless'). The reviewer considers that the acting of Dorothy Gish as Tessa is 'marred somewhat by the use of stock expressions and gestures', while as Carlo 'Ronald Colman has no opportunity to show his talent'.⁴³

Many of those involved in the film were to have notable careers. William Powell, who played Tito, became a romantic comedian, identified especially with *The Thin Man* (1934); presumably Ronald Colman was given 'opportunity to show his talent' when cast as a suave sophisticated adventurer, for instance in *Bulldog Drummond* (1929), *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Lost Horizon* (both 1937), down to *Round the World in 80 Days* (1956). Henry King went on to direct the full Hollywood gamut of genres, including westerns (*Jesse James* (1939)) and musicals (*Carousel* (1956)). Above all there are the legendary Gish sisters. When a retrospective of Lillian's films was being prepared by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, King reiterated an opinion attributed to John Barrymore sixty years earlier, in 1920: 'I consider that Miss Gish is to film what Duse and Bernhardt were to the theater.'⁴⁴

Lillian (1893–1993) and Dorothy (1898–1968) Gish made their screen debut in D. W. Griffith's *An Unseen Enemy* (1912), and continued to appear together under his direction on a number of occasions, indeed as sisters in Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1921), their last film with him. For all his admiration of and attachment to Lillian—whose star status Griffith had secured by casting her as the lead in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—he could no longer meet her price (in the mid-1920s she was said to be earning \$400,000 a year). The sisters moved to the Inspiration Company, which made *Romola*, then Lillian signed with MGM

and Dorothy worked for a time with Herbert Wilcox in England. The careers of both went into decline with the advent of talkies: Dorothy's never recovered, though Lillian continued to be cast almost to the end of her long life.

As far as Henry King's *Romola* is concerned, the parallels between Tito's two wives, Romola and Tessa, united in a sisterhood of suffering, are reinforced by the fact that the roles are played by the Gish sisters. Dorothy, a natural comedienne, enacts Tessa as a rustic clown, big boots, knockabout comedy routines and all. She is characterised to some extent by stereotype, as critics pointed out. However, the representation of Tessa in this way underscores not only Lillian's refinement as Romola, a woman of high degree, but also ways in which Romola is not a stereotype.

Inevitably, there are modifications to George Eliot's text. For a start, political and moral complexities are diluted, so that the subtleties of Florentine politics are reduced to an opposition of freedom and tyranny. The tenor of the film is anti-mob, pro-moderation: I contend that it valorises, with an element of equivocation, the private and domestic over the public life. This emphasis is enforced by one of the major changes, the introduction of the character of Carlo Bucellini, a young artist played by Ronald Colman. This non-political role combines the functions given in the novel to Romola's uncle and godfather Bernardo del Nero and the artist Piero di Cosimo, neither of whom is in the film. Nor does her brother Dino, Fra Luca, figure. Removal of these characters is an expeditious way of stripping out the novel's interest in the complexities of Romola's relationships with her male kin, including her painful tutelary relationship with Savonarola as surrogate father. Each of these men in some way deserts or abandons her, ultimately by dying. In the film, by contrast, the gentle Carlo's fidelity to Romola is rewarded by his position as her consort at the end.

Structural elements of the novel are retained, in a cruder form. There are symmetries and contrasts such as that between Tessa and Romola, both wooed and deceived by Tito; and between Bardo and Baldassarre, each a father to Tito (in-law, and foster-father respectively)—he betrays them both, but Baldassarre gets

his revenge. Motifs of rescues and drowning, prominent in the novel, are re-deployed. For example, early on Tito (William Powell) comes to the aid of Romola's father, the blind scholar Bardo, when he is caught up in a marketplace brawl, thus achieving an introduction into the Bardi household. An explicit caption leaves the audience in no doubt how to regard Tito: 'Tito knew he was a hero by accident, but he made no protest. As the wind blew, so blew he.' This is representative of the treatment of the character: in no sense is it his movie. His perfidy is exposed in several ways: by the kinds of 'authorial' judgement stated in the caption quoted; by warnings in dialogue, as when Carlo says to Romola, 'I regret to see you and your father show so much interest in this Greek. Are you sure he is all he appears?'; and by explicit juxtapositions—for instance, a sequence in which he is seen ingratiating himself with both Romola and her father, then leaves their house to rejoin Tessa, who is waiting for him outside. An even more pointed juxtaposition is a cut from Tessa, playing with her baby on the hearth 'While the wedding bells pealed for Romola', to the newly-wed couple, Romola and Tito, emerging from the church.

How then is Romola portrayed? We meet her indoors, in her father's house, as 'the maid of Florence, learned of books but of the world untaught'. The film will present her learning 'from the world', particularly her experiences with Tito. A trajectory is plotted from her initial fascination with him, through resistance and contempt, to her achieving (temporarily?) independent moral authority. The coding of her development is largely conventional, based on notions of masculine space as public, female private. Romola is seen indoors in her father's house for the first three-quarters of the film: she is first seen in an exterior setting as she leaves the church with Tito on her wedding day. He rapidly gains political preferment, rejecting his foster-father Baldassarre who has tracked him down, neglecting Romola and betraying Bardi's trust in him by selling his library. When Romola realises what Tito has done, she faces him down in a powerful accusatory sequence premonitory of her final victory over him. Her decision to leave Tito at this point is marked by her quite literally coming out, fleeing the city 'to hide her broken life in a strange, unfriendly

world'. On the road, she meets Savonarola and comes under his influence; then as she turns back to Florence she falls in with Tessa, who, distraught by the loss of the wedding ring used in her mock marriage to Tito, is in the process of moving into the house in the city he has provided. When Romola finds the ring, Tessa's baby obligingly smiles for her.

Meanwhile, on Savonarola's return to Florence he has been denied access to his church and is being stoned as a heretic. Romola and Tessa appear, whereupon Romola rushes to Savonarola's assistance in a move onto a public stage analogous to that of Margaret Hale coming to the defence of John Thornton against his factory workers in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). Romola is injured, Tessa takes her in and nurses her, their sisterliness reinforced in ignorance of their respective relationships with Tito. 'Morning found a strange silence hanging over the city ...' as the climax approaches through a set of coincidences which though analogous to the events of the novel significantly modify them. In the novel, Tito is escaping a mob in chapter 47; concurrently, Savonarola is undergoing torture, while Romola is finding meaning for her life in the plague-stricken village. Here, Savonarola has been condemned to death; Tito is denounced as he has formerly denounced others, and flees to Tessa's house where he arrives, pursued. The camera looks with him towards Tessa; then with Romola, holding the baby, at him; and back to Romola. The shot of Lillian Gish's ethereal face is held for what feels like a very long time but is in fact twenty seconds. Her features barely move as the realisation dawns that her husband is no stranger to the place, and that she is nursing his child. With immense dignity and authority, she registers contempt, gesturing Tito towards the window. In this instance, the absence of words is powerful: what is unspoken is the point.

Tito obeys and moves toward the window. Tessa throws herself upon him, with which they fall out into the river below. She gets her head above water long enough to call to Romola 'Holy madonna take care of my baby.' There is a direct transfer of the maternal role: through her 'sister', Romola becomes a (virgin?) mother, and the implications are worked systematically in the

remaining ten minutes of the film. Tito almost makes it to shore, but Baldassarre holds him under the water until he drowns, then goes under himself. There is a cut to Savonarola at the stake.

The image of Romola as Madonna (which in George Eliot's text occurs in chapters 68–69, the episode in the plague-stricken village)⁴⁵ occurs in the film when Romola rushes forward to intercede for Savonarola. Chapter 65, 'The Trial by Fire', where rain prevents Savonarola's immolation, is conflated in the film with his eventual execution in chapter 72, 'The Last Silence'. On screen there is a deluge which Savonarola had prophesied: the sub-titles read 'A Miracle! A Miracle!'; then, bringing out structural and narrative symmetries, 'Thus died a sinner and a saint, one the victim of a lie; the other a martyr to the truth. Life inflicts no hurts life itself cannot heal. If winter is bleak, spring will be more fair, and summer will have its rose and its romance'. Fade out to the loggia of the Bardi house where Romola is grouped with the baby and the faithful Carlo, the Joseph in this Holy Family, as the final caption declares 'The world will learn its greatest lesson from women like you, Romola—women who stand at the foot of every Cross—and teach men to be more kind'. The reference to women at the foot of the Cross suggests a further analogy of Romola with Mary Magdalene. In the more confronting ending of the novel, Romola is a matriarch, heading up a female household with Tessa and the children, and her aunt Monna Brigida (not prominent in the film)—albeit a household substantially dedicated to the education of the prince, Tito's son Lillo.

The Romola of the film is ultimately contained, subordinated to the Christian master-narrative—and yet despite all she has had some agency not least and not only through her moral victory over Tito. The film orchestrates in this characterisation an assertion of female power, at once limited and limitless, a power construed in Christian terms of the saving grace of the Madonna and child. I find Henry King's *Romola* a compelling and coherent work in its own right, though like many of the adaptations of George Eliot's novels to which I have referred, it draws the sting of the intellectual challenge and unorthodox moral situations developed in its prototype. Despite her reluctance to countenance stage adaptations,

I would like to think that George Eliot might have looked kindly on this film. In this hope I derive some comfort from the fact that she was no enemy of technology, as her comment after attending a demonstration of the telephone with Lewes reveals: 'It is very wonderful, very useful'.⁴⁶

Notes

- 1 This discussion of mediations of George Eliot's texts as theatrical and film or television adaptations forms part of a larger project. 'The Posthumous George Eliot' is concerned with a number of facets of George Eliot's reputation after her death in 1880, including various constructions of her authorial identity in biographical and autobiographical writings; ways she has been absorbed and resisted by writers coming after her; and adaptations of her fiction into other media. An analogous study is Patsy Stoneman, *Bronte Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights*, Hemel Hempstead, 1996. My research has been supported by a University of Sydney Sesqui Research Grant: I acknowledge the research assistance indefatigably provided by Amanda Collins. I wish to thank colleagues who have contributed to this project over time, especially Penny Gay and David Kelly; also Moira Gatens, whose work on Spinoza and George Eliot illuminates some issues touched on in this paper: see 'The Politics of "Presence" and "Difference": Working Through Spinoza and Eliot', in *Visible Women: Essays on Feminist Legal Theory and Political Philosophy*, ed. Susan James and Stephanie Palmer, Oxford and Portland, Oregon, 2002, pp.159–74.
- 2 The present essay draws on some of my previously published work: 'Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: faithfully presented by Roman Polanski?', *Sydney Studies in English* 7 (1981–82): 115–22; 'Whose Middlemarch? The 1994 British Broadcasting Corporation Television Production', *Sydney Studies in English* 21 (1995–96): 95–102; 'George Eliot on the Stage: Helen Edmundson's *The Mill on the Floss*', in *Imperfect Apprehensions: Essays in English Literature in Honour of G. A. Wilkes*, ed. Geoffrey Little, Sydney, 1996, pp.225–34; and entries on 'films', 'television adaptations', 'theatre', and 'theatrical adaptations' in *The Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall, Oxford, 2000.
- 3 Seymour Chatman's essay 'What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)' (1980) is a classic cautionary discussion, reprinted in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, 4th edn, New York, 1992, pp.403–19. Two recent discussions which speculate usefully on terminology

- for discussion of adaptation are Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation', in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore, New Brunswick, N.J., 2000, pp.54–76, and Jocelyn Harris, '“Such a transformation!”: Translation, Imitation and Intertextuality in Jane Austen' in *Jane Austen on Screen*, eds Gina Macdonald and Andrew Macdonald, Cambridge, forthcoming 2003.
- 4 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. G. S. Haight, 9 vols, New Haven, 1954–78, iv.10. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.
 - 5 *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, ed. J. W. Cross, 3 vols, Edinburgh, 1885, i.39. Hereafter cited as Cross.
 - 6 *Letters*, i.195–96.
 - 7 *Letters*, iii.355.
 - 8 *Letters*, iv.132.
 - 9 Amanda Cross, *The Collected Stories*, New York, 1997, pp.144–63.
 - 10 *The Journals of George Eliot*, eds Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston, Cambridge, 1998, p.120. Hereafter cited as *Journals*.
 - 11 Cross, iii.437.
 - 12 Caroline Levine's and Mark W. Turner's *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's Romola*, Aldershot, 1998, includes relevant discussion, especially Turner's 'George Eliot v. Frederic Leighton: Whose Text Is It Anyway?', pp.17–35. Hugh Witemeyer discusses the illustrations and their production at some length in *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, New Haven, 1979.
 - 13 *Letters*, iv.57.
 - 14 *Letters*, ix.275; and see *Journals*, p.183. Earlier in her career she had been offputting but not so fierce: 'Mrs. Lewes begs me to say that although she does not think her story suitable for stage representation, yet if you think otherwise, she would be unwilling to stand in your way by any opposition on her part' (*Letters*, viii.303).
 - 15 1 February 1880, *Letters*, ix.288.
 - 16 *Letters*, vii.13n.
 - 17 Kerry Powell, *Women and Victorian Theatre*, Cambridge, 1997, pp.108–09.
 - 18 *Letters*, viii.303.
 - 19 See Shoshana Knapp, 'George Eliot and W. S. Gilbert: Silas Marner into Dan'l Druce', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40 (1986): 450.
 - 20 A libretto (Rachel Trickett) and score (John Joubert, opus 31, dated March 1959–August 1960) for *Silas Marner: an opera in three acts after the novel by George Eliot* are at the Nuneaton Central Library.
 - 21 Information from 'A Tchaikovsky/George Eliot Opera that never happened', *The George Eliot Review* 30 (1999): 64.
 - 22 *Evening Standard*, 27 December 1985. Catherine Runcie has written illuminatingly on 'Silas Marner: Novel into TV Film', in *Imperfect*

- Apprehensions*, ed. Little, pp.235–47.
- 23 16 February 1927. The same version was read by the Federation of Women Zionists in London on 22 August 1974. A manuscript is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
- 24 *Kinematograph Weekly*, 19 May 1921, p.48. See also Kathleen Adams, 'Daniel Deronda—1921 Style', *The George Eliot Review* 30 (1999): 57–58.
- 25 2 January 1937, p.4.
- 26 *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 January 1937, p.31.
- 27 *Today's Cinema*, p.4.
- 28 George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Adapted for the stage by Geoffrey Beevers, London, 1990.
- 29 There has been substantial critical discussion since: for example by Ian McKillop and Alison Platt, '“Beholding in a magic panorama”: television and the illustration of *Middlemarch*', in *The Classic Novel from Page to Screen*, eds Robert Giddings and Erica Sheen, Manchester, 2000, pp.71–92; and see note 1.
- 30 'In Bed with George Eliot', *Evening Standard*, 2 September 1993.
- 31 *Middlemarch: A Study in Provincial Life*, 1872, ed. David Carroll, Oxford, 1986, rev. 1992, p.272. All references to *Middlemarch* are to this edition.
- 32 An extended discussion of mediations of *Romola* would take into account the fact that it is the most evidently commodified of George Eliot's texts, and hence the one where her authority is most explicitly destabilised. In its print form material conditions of publication and distribution were explicitly in question. *Romola* was the occasion of 'the most magnificent offer ever yet made for fiction' (*Letters*, iv.17–18) by which the entrepreneurial publisher George Smith lured her away from the Edinburgh house of Blackwood. The novel appeared in monthly parts in the *Cornhill Magazine*, July 1862–August 1863, with illustrations by Frederic Leighton, already an established artist; and in three volumes from Smith, Elder in July 1863. For detailed publication history, including accounts of the various editions from both Smith, Elder, and Blackwood, see the Clarendon edition of *Romola*, 1863, ed. Andrew Brown, Oxford, 1993, esp. pp.xliii–lx. References to *Romola* are to this edition.
- 33 Cross, ii.352.
- 34 *The Novels of George Eliot*, London, 1959, p.175.
- 35 *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll, London, 1971, p.200.
- 36 *Critical Heritage*, p.203.
- 37 September 1863, p.11, in *Romola*, ed. Leonée Ormond, London, 1999, p.625.

- 38 See George V. Griffith, 'Romola on the American Stage', *The George Eliot Review* 20 (1989): 23–27.
- 39 In this context, see Kevin Sweeney and Elizabeth Winston, 'Redirecting Melodrama: Gish, Henry King, and Romola', *Literature and Film Quarterly* 23 (1995): 137–45.
- 40 *Bioscope*, 12 March 1925, p.49.
- 41 *Bioscope*, pp.50, 49.
- 42 *Kinematograph Weekly*, 12 March 1925, p.58.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Lillian Gish*, New York, 1980, p.26.
- 45 See Leighton's illustration 'At the Well', p.558.
- 46 *Letters*, vii.16n.