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GEORGE ELIOT AND AMERICAN FILMS

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To Kathleen Adams' discussion of George Eliot film adaptations (Review, 1977), I would like to add two interesting items omitted and a few comments. Other than that piece and a few brief remarks about George Eliot theatrical adaptations in a column in the London Illustrated News (Mar. 5, 1927), nothing has been written about Eliot on stage and screen. The subject deserves more treatment.

The silent era of filmmaking in America coincided with a period in American culture when English "classics" possessed a certain cachet that made them good properties for an entertainment industry with aspirations to something grander, more cultural. Not coincidentally, nearly all the Eliot adaptations done were silents, among them two items omitted from the earlier article, film adaptations of Silas Marner and The Mill on the Floss.

Readers of The New York Clipper on December 4, 1915 saw a large, two column, half page ad which read:

Mutual Film Corporation Announces
A Masterpiece Extraordinary
The Mill on the Floss
A Stupendous Film Dramatization
of George Eliot's Famous Novel
featuring the Popular Star Mignon Anderson

This Mutual release of a Thanhouser film, a long five reel film, opened December 16 and was reviewed two days later in The Moving Picture World. Much of the review is taken up by an account of who plays what role, and the reviewer was impressed by the acting. Apparently the film was faithful to the book, to the spirit of Maggie's independence, the compelling sense of tragedy, and to at least its more noteworthy scenes. Mentioned, for example, are Maggie's rebellious haircutting and her pushing Lucy into the mud. Also worthy of note at an age when films began moving off the backlots and onto location was the flood scene, so "vividly realistic" as to "suggest its having been staged on the scene of some flood disaster". American fascination with English classics is evident in the fact that this American Mill preceded the English version by fully twenty-five years.

Seven years after that early Mill, on October 3, 1922, under New York State license, Chopin Features released Are Children to Blame?, another silent five reeler. Written and directed by Paul Price, this loose adaptation of Silas Marner starred Em Gorman as Eppie, named Little Rosalind in the film, and Alex K. Shannon as the Silas figure. Moving Picture World (Dec. 2, 1922) described the plot of the film without evaluating it. Not so Variety, which, after being forced to concede that "the moral values of the picture are perfect", went on to label it "as bad a production as ever gets within walking distance of Times Square" (Dec. 8, 1922). Something of the seriousness with which many thought the film should approach the classics is suggested in the reviewer's dismay over the film's infidelity to the book. "The story," the reviewer complained, "is a crude transcript of 'Silas Marner', with such variations

as making the weaver a blacksmith named David something, placing the action in a nondescript place and at a time when people wore clothes of about 1900 and rode in autos of about 1916 model." Those unimaginable alterations notwithstanding, the plot is roughly that of Eliot's novel.

The same year saw the release of another Silas Marner (listed in Mrs. Adams' article), which was described by Variety (May 26, 1922) as "a seven-reel treat of tiresomeness" whose "sole redeeming power and box office strength will depend on the title of the book, one that probably every school kid in America has read." As this remark makes regrettably plain, film adaptations of Eliot novels have not done well in America. The one exception was the 1925 MGM Romola. It played to packed houses on its Christmas release in 1924 and was as successful on its re-release the following year. Even the ordinarily curmudgeonly New York Times (Dec. 2, 1924) praised the film for its scenery, direction, and action as "a film to be remembered". Yet I suspect that it was less Eliot's novel that drew the crowds than it was the film's aggrandizing of the historical romance and the presence of Lillian Gish, whose name filled the Hollywood trade papers, the fan magazines and columns, and the imaginations of moviegoers of the twenties. Only a generation earlier a staged version of Romola, starring Julia Marlowe and Robert Taber, toured the country with little success. Romola, as earnest a Victorian book as any Eliot wrote, a story of heroic self-sacrifice and dedication to religious and scholarly ideals, was singularly inapposite for the roaring twenties. Yet there it was on the American silent screen, the only successful American theatrical or cinematic adaptation of an Eliot novel.

One hopes that things have changed. Silas Marner, so long a chestnut in American school curricula, fell out of favor by the 1960s, a full half century after Eliot's works had been so firmly entrenched in the ranks of the classics that they were doomed to a hopeless misuse by and failure in the popular media such as film and theater. The recent BBC Silas Marner, so successful in Great Britain, may replicate the astounding recent successes of Brideshead Revisited and Bleak House and reverse "the sad fortunes" of Eliot's much abused fourth book.

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New York Clipper on December 4th 1915.