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ROMOLA ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

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About George Eliot Americans were certain of two truths by the time of her death in 1880: she was a genius who was pushing the novel into a new terrain of seriousness, intense moral purpose, and artful design; she was also a glum realist in whose work characters were called to a high moral duty in a godless world without transcendent values. Lavish praise of her work from its first appearance in the United States in 1858 continued largely without qualification until the publication of Middlemarch in 1873. Throughout the seventies she was as frequently denounced, "gloom and doom" replacing "humour and pathos" as reviewers' formulas. Eliot's intent was to widen men's sympathies; as a realist for whom that phrase meant more than quaint local colour, her goal was to guide readers to "do without opium and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance."¹ Americans wanted, by contrast, what was so poignantly expressed in a question posed by a reviewer in Scribner's: "Is there not a Saviour for us?" (October, 1874). Americans wanted light and hope and moral uplift.

Little wonder then that unlike nearly all of her fellow English novelists of the Victorian era whose works were routinely adapted for the American stage, Eliot never saw her novels produced in American theatres. From the fifteen volumes of William C. Odell's monumental Annals of the New York Stage her name is missing; nor, with one exception, may an Eliot title be found in any of the volumes of the Best Plays series from 1895 to the present, in Rodin's Later American Plays, or in Hixon and Hennessee's Nineteenth-Century American Drama.

From midcentury on the novel's headlong rush into realism was more advanced in England than in the United States. By the time the word "realism" was first used in Atlantic Monthly in 1857, it described the work of a generation of English practitioners. The novel, both in England and in the United States, also preceded the drama in its adoption of a realist aesthetic. By the time the American stage was ready for realistic domestic drama, Eliot's contradictory reputation was fixed. The only Eliot novel adapted to the stage, Romola, was fittingly chosen to resolve the contradiction. Her glum realism - which for adaptation purposes meant all of her novels but one—was cast aside just when the canon of theatrical material was turning increasingly realistic. Her status as classic genius was preserved ironically by those whose dramatic and theatrical tastes were most conservative in the adaptation of her most "poetic" work, her only historical romance.

The theatrical adaptation of Romola preserved Eliot for Americans but at the expense of the truth of her work. Ironically the adaptation process saved her by turning her into what she had been charged with being all along—a wholly secular writer. Secular could be made acceptable so long as it was not realistic. The adapting medium—the American stage of the 1890s—assured that this would be the case, presenting us with an interesting case study of the role played by adapting media in the consolidation or alternation of a reputation.

Romola came to the American stage thanks to Elwyn A. Barron, novelist, playwright, and dramatic critic and editorial writer for the Chicago Inter Ocean. Judged by his novels and his theatrical work, Barron must have been attracted to Romola as a historical romance. By the time of the adaptation of the Eliot novel in 1896, he had already written an unproduced blank verse drama

and had had produced four plays with such titles as A Moral Crime, Lady Ashley, When Bess Was Queen, and Out of the Storm. Barron's adaptation was a timely acquisition for the company of Robert Taber and Julia Marlowe. Married six years after her first professional lead as Parthenia in Ingomar, Taber and Marlowe were the lead players in a company that had carved out its niche in an increasingly competitive theatrical market by doing what Julia Marlowe had always aspired to—entirely Shakespearian repertoire.

To compete with the growing power of the theatrical managers to monopolize theatres and bookings and thus to dictate public taste, independents such as Taber and Marlowe had to craft their repertoire to appeal to an audience otherwise unserved. Hence their choice of Romola as an addition to their Shakespearian repertoire. Odd as it may seem now to an age which has written off Romola as the least likely among Eliot's novels to be popular, in the nineteenth-century United States Romola was one of Eliot's most well received books. "Curiously enough in America it seems to have surpassed 'Middlemarch', "George Henry Lewes mused in a November 1876 letter to John Blackwood (Letters, VI. 312). Lewes underestimated both American reservations about realism and the American taste for historical romance as antidote. Nor was it an odd theatrical choice, for it appealed to Marlowe's conservative dramatic tastes, providing her the opportunity to play an idealized heroine when European imports were offering more Noras and Heddas. As poetic and historical drama, moreover, Romola afforded ample material for elaborate costume and set design. Lastly, adaptations of novels, particularly historical romances, peaked in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. DuMaurier's Trilby and Hawkins' The Prisoner of Zenda, each published in 1894, had long successful runs on stage in the 90's. So common was the practice that Marlowe was forced to respond in a 1902 article in The Independent to the charge that the proliferation of novels on stage inhibited the development of an original American drama, by which was meant a realistic domestic drama. She argued lamely that Shakespeare, in going to Holinshed, was an adapter, albeit a talented one; she also cited numerous successful adaptations, Uncle Tom's Cabin the most notable among them. Marlowe correctly saw the motive for such adaptations in "the profits that accrue from these semi-romantic, semi-historical plays!" Yet if Romola was undertaken with profit in mind, it failed. According to Marlowe, this "beautiful and reverent adaptation . . . enjoyed a fine success artistically, but not financially."²

First produced at the Davidson Theatre in Milwaukee on September 7, 1896, in repertoire with Romeo and Juliet, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, and Much Ado about Nothing, the play went on in spite of lukewarm reviews to Minneapolis, St. Paul, and from Denver on to the famous Baldwin Theatre in San Francisco. Over the next eight months they circled back via the South, playing New Orleans, then moving up-river from St. Louis to Chicago, Detroit and, by the end of January, Cleveland. They finished the play that spring with performances in Philadelphia and Boston. New Yorkers never saw it.

The play's tepid reviews are an accurate measure of Eliot's American reception at the turn of the century. Just fifteen years after her death, dismay over her gloom had abated and she was secure in the ranks of the classics, inert, no longer the controversial agnostic and glum realist who lived her life in defiance of society's moral code. She was therefore accorded the respect due a "classic" writer, even praised in what one senses was something of a formula as "the great English novelist." But there was neither excited anticipation nor outrage at the idea of someone's adapting Eliot's work. In general, in fact, the adaptation was applauded more than the novel. A writer for the St. Paul Pioneer Press put it frankly, if not sourly:

It may be said of Elwyn Barron's 'Romola' as of the Paul Potter's 'Trilby' that the play is better than the book. Although the dramatization retains the motif, the characterization, with many of the individual situations, much of the philosophy of George Eliot's noted novel, Mr. Barron has rearranged the situation, clarified and hastened the action, and relieved both plot and dialogue of much ponderous, pedantic padding. The improvement may be denied by that minority which flatters its own intelligence in spelling out learned references, by that feminine contingent that sympathizes with Mrs. Lewis's [sic] desire to prove that a woman may know as much as a man. But, as against the book, the average citizen will prefer the play.

A few reviewers may have been old enough to remember how the book had been received in its time, but now it was viewed as "a magnificent failure, as lifeless as the musty records from which she dug her material," as one San Francisco writer described it. Another called it "that splendid mausoleum in which Eliot forever buried her simplicity."

Given these feelings about the book and Eliot's reputation by 1896, it is not surprising that the weaknesses of the play came in its closest approaches to the novel. It was charged with being too long, pedantically padded, overladen with soliloquies, out of touch with the time. In the age of the heroines of Shaw, Ibsen, and Strindberg, Romola was thought to be "altogether too spiritual and perfect a character for a heroine of the modern stage," as a Detroit reviewer complained.

That Romola was an earlier Victorian work out of place in the 90s is clear not only in the remark about the heroine's spirituality but also in its rewriting. Barron saw in the villainy of Tito and the revenge of his father the theatrical stuff of American melodrama; his fourth act climax has Tito plunge from a river bridge, pursued by a torch wielding mob. Savonarola's part in the play is so marginalized that the actor who played him (Bassett Roe) doubled parts. Critics applauded the Tito-Baldassarre plot and the near disappearance of Savonarola, a reversal of Eliot's values. "It is not the grandeur of the priest but the moral deficiency of the Greek, who commands the attention of the auditors," a Denver writer remarked. When Barron reverted with fidelity to his source by adding an epilogue in which Romola comforts Tessa's bereft child and thus fulfils Eliot's Victorian notions about the spiritual strength of self-abnegation, reviewers, satisfied that the play had ended in the fourth act, misread the epilogue as a clumsy attempt to avoid ending with a sense of Romola's weakness.

If Romola was chosen as a safe Eliot book, not yet made sombre and secular in the manner of her novels of the seventies when she was consistently charged in the American press with having lost her spirituality, ironically the adaptation and its reception subverted the text and began a process of making her safe by making her what she had been charged with being all along—a wholly secular writer. Theatrical adaptation made her an entertainer, not an earnest Victorian struggling with religious issues.

What modest success the play enjoyed was more the product of Julia Marlowe's charm than Elwyn Barron's writing. Reviewers everywhere called her an "ideal" Romola, stately, poised, beautiful. In the play's opening scene she entered leading her blind father. She was robed in black, with a string of pearls around her neck and a thin white headband around her long blonde hair. In her arms she carried a bouquet of lilies. With such loveliness, not with the passion of her acting, she commanded the attention of the audience, moving the St. Louis reviewer to ecstasy:

But how beautiful she is! A bonnier sight never blessed mortal eyes than her Romola as she hears her lover's declaration, and in the epilogue when she takes the child of Tito

and Tessa to her heart she has the face of a saint. She is somewhat plumper than of yore, and every ounce of increase has added to her beauty.

Along with Maude Adams, Viola Allen, and Ada Rehan, Marlowe belonged to what one theater historian calls "the personality school of actress," the "sisterhood of sweetness and light," women whose personalities were the characters they played.³ They were known for their womanly loveliness and feminine virtue, unsullied by coarseness or passion. Romola thus provided the perfect vehicle and Marlowe the perfect actress for the spiritual uplift which Americans of a generation earlier thought they found missing in Eliot.

As for Julia Marlowe, just enough similarities link her life with Eliot's to tempt one into thinking that fate had chosen her for the role of Romola. Born in the English Lake Country just three years after Romola was published, Sarah Frances Frost, like Eliot, underwent in the next two decades several changes of name and identity. When her shopkeeper father moved the family to a frontier town in Kansas, in keeping with so radical a change to the new world, he changed the family name to Brough. In 1884 when she made her first appearance on a New York stage (she had debuted a half dozen years earlier in a child's H.M.S. Pinafore company), Sarah Frances Brough, a young English girl who had grown to maturity on the American frontier, had transformed herself into Julia Marlowe. Marlowe would fulfil the girl's intent to interpret the heroines of Shakespeare better than anyone had before. As a girl she read avidly, not what she would have read in her native England, but the stuff of the American West, the stories of Deadwood Dick. Later, like the English novelist as a girl, she immersed herself in Walter Scott. Also like Eliot, Marlowe had few recreations and few intimate friends, thus growing to maturity a serious and independent woman whose accomplishments brought her a fame she felt always uneasy over. Both tried as much as possible to live private lives; each disliked reporters and critics and each discouraged publicity.

Marlowe's achievements were considerable, all the result of hard work. She shared with Eliot a scholarly insistence on getting at truth, often doing extensive background reading for her parts. For the Shakespearian roles in which she made her fame—Juliet, Katherine, Portia, Ophelia, Viola, Rosalind—she pored over a set of the "New Variorum" Shakespeare which she carried with her on her tours. She spent hours practising, made her own prompt books, threw herself into the demands of her parts by taking up such sports as fencing, and worked with singular dedication on the training of her voice.

Marlowe's attraction to Romola and her approach to the role were uncannily similar to Eliot's own fascination with her Florentine material and her labour in writing the book. Always the perfectionist, Marlowe insisted on authentic detail, traveling to Florence and Venice during the summer of 1896 to gather information and a sense of place. She insisted for her costuming on a peculiar, deep brownish red that she had noticed in the paintings of Filippino Lippi, much as Eliot in her correspondence with Frederic Leighton, who illustrated Romola for the Cornhill, had described with scholarly precision the garb of Romola. To describe for Leighton a white robe she imagined Romola wearing, she referred him to "Ghirlandajo's frescoes— the engravings of them I mean—in the choir of Santa Maria Novella," where he might "notice if the women in the groups have not that plain piece of opaque drapery over the head which haunts my memory" (Letters, IV,43). That same letter goes on at great length about details of dress, trailing off into apology for such fussiness before concluding that "approximate truth is the only truth attainable, but at least one must strive for that, and not wade off into arbitrary falsehood." This was a sentiment with which Julia Marlowe agreed, although as it had for Eliot, such striving for authenticity was lost on her audiences.

Just as Lewes's worry that Eliot had spent too much time in museum and library was borne out in reviews of the novel which remarked that it smelled too much of the lamp, so too reviewers of the theatrical production complained. Audiences of the Gilded Age wanted not historically accurate detail, but grand historical pictures which satisfied their need for drama. The effort to preserve Eliot's reputation as a classic writer without confronting the truth about her as a realist was abetted by this stage adaptation, but the result was neither true Eliot nor good theater. American preference for romance in fiction and melodrama on stage would remain triumphant at least for a few years more.

NOTES

1. The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1954-55, 1978). III, 366. Hereafter referred to as Letters.
2. "The Future of the Historical Romance for the Stage." The Independent, June, 1902, p. 1533.
3. Garff B. Wilson, Three Hundred Years of American Drama and Theatre (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 273.