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Ian Mackillop

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Ian Mackillop The BBC *Middlemarch*

From 12th January to 16th February 1994 the BBC screened its six-part *Middlemarch*, produced by Louis Marks, scripted by Andrew Davies and directed by Anthony Page, six safe hands (too safe?). It has been issued as a two-cassette videogram (BBCV 5253, 1994) in two parts, the original episode-breaks removed; references here are to hour-minute-second of these tapes. The production is like a grand Folio Society edition.

The BBC *Middlemarch* is a browns-and-greens 'painterly' production, much of the extravagance of the original bled away. The two principals are given a dignity which Eliot did not make them suffer. Ladislav (Rufus Sewell) loses his playfulness. He has no troop of 'droll children' to take nutting or for Punch-and-Judy style shows, and he never lolls on a sofa. He sings only in Italian and the ditty he improvises walking to church, during which he resembled 'an incarnation of the spring', is omitted. 'You know Ladislav's look', remarks Lydgate, 'a sort of Daphnis'. There is no 'sunshiny laughter'. Yet it is in his uninhibitedness that Eliot represents Ladislav as a force of nature, and as such Dorothea's fascination for him has the greater force and innocence. If Ladislav is an intense and dishy youth merely, he becomes a sanctimonious adventurer. Sewell has a Chopin look, but there are no smiles at or from his Ladislav. The same is true of Dorothea (Juliet Aubrey). In the novel she can make fun of herself, of her 'naughtiness' and 'great outbursts', but self-mockery seems hard to handle in the presentation of women in 1994. There is no problem with her sister, not because Sloanes (such as Celia) are inherently funny, but because they are able to send themselves up. (*The Official Sloane Ranger Diary* and its like are frequently found in their bathrooms.) Conscious self-parody is, it seems, something a serious female protagonist cannot do. So Dorothea is locked into more 'Victorian' earnestness than that of 1870. Eliot's Dorothea is a physical force, with 'powerful, feminine, maternal hands', still the person who as a girl showered kisses on the pate of her bald doll. In the crucial episode (I:1.49.46 - 1.54.00) before Casaubon's seizure, the film drains her, whereas in the novel she is energized. She is seen copying, comforted in her labours by her maid Tantripp. She goes and quarrels with Casaubon, then retires in exhausted dejection. In the novel a Blake-like vitality is engendered when she returns to her desk: she writes and understands better. 'In her indignation there was a sense of superiority'. Then Casaubon's heart fails: Dorothea rises as he falls. The film does not allow either Ladislav or Dorothea to be formidable. Five years ago Kenneth Branagh could have delivered Ladislav's sunniness and Emma Thompson done the generosity of Dorothea.

The blandness of the BBC *Middlemarch* affects Casaubon, to some good effect. 'For my part I am very sorry for him,' but Eliot's avowal did not defuse the savagery of her rendering of this lost soul. Patrick Malahide's delicate frame and narrow head rhyme with the physical slenderness of Sewell's Ladislav. He is the sadder for seeming less old than his years. Davies, in his typically careful script, gives the root of Casaubon's marital loneliness, that is, his equation of Dorothea's view of the *parerga* with that of other scholars. He is seen (I:1.25.33) in a library haunted by her urgings, covertly watching his learned

neighbours, physically solid, out of Mantegna. Intertextually, Malahide's performance succeeds his fractious police inspector in *Minder*, and complements his excellent Kenneth Halliwell (Joe Orton's partner) in Simon Moss's *Cock Ups*, a curious parallel. Muscially (Christopher Gunning and Stanley Myers), the Casaubon motif on woodwind is admirable.

Blandness damages the film elsewhere. Douglas Hodge's Lydgate is too close to his performance as the young Gerald Middleton in the ITV (Euston Films) *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*. He is never really 'cold'; there is no 'tic-douloureux', though he does attempt the 'excited effort' and 'talking widely for the sake of resisting any personal bearing' of Lydgate, but this in a concocted scene with Farebrother, in which he has 1980s-speak: 'I feel as if I have been losing control of life' and 'It's only money, after all.' There is some erosion of distinctiveness in the heights and depths of behaviour. As Featherstone, Michael Hordern's familiar whinneying is a long way from Eliot's 'aged hyena'. Mary Garth (Rachel Power) displays only shock at his death-bed tyranny. She does not say 'I will not let the close of your life soil the beginning of mine'. Understandably some elevated language has to be omitted, to avoid confusing a mass-audience, but Mary's eloquent resolution at this moment is indispensable, indeed, is Mary. As in the case of Dorothea, the film prefers the female to be more of a victim than in the Victorian original. No wonder Farebrother does not recommend directness and honesty to Mary as 'noble'. He only says they are 'kind'. And, more than her 'nobility' Mary's buoyancy, 'merriment within', is missing. Throughout there is a shortage of 'sweet delight'. (Of course, blushing has finally departed the visual arts.) Complaint must be halted by reference to at least one great success. The Reverend Camden Farebrother is played with composed diffidence by Simon Chandler, his neat, controlled gestures (handling a straw hat; loading Mary's basket) beautifully delineating the third fount of intelligence in *Middlemarch*.

One misses many Eliot voices: the eloquence in Rome, the exquisite toughness: 'The troublesome ones in a family are usually either the wits or the idiots'. To find equivalence to *her* style cannot be done without having *some* style, and TV drama tends to haughty or economic indifference to the cinematic innovation. This *Middlemarch* is not unaware of Kubrick (*Barry Lyndon*) and Bergman (*Fanny and Alexander*). It is, perhaps, from Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* that it borrows a binding motif, that of the 'document'. *Middlemarch* is a world of fallen Titans, like that of Keats's *Hyperion*. Its idealists strive for the real seeing of Moneta, struggling through and against half-a-dozen kinds of document or scribal charter. This *Middlemarch* flickers through Lydgate's anatomical pastels, the calligraphic notebooks of Casaubon, and his will and codicil, the *Pioneer* proof-sheets, even the hustings-effigy, 'Brooke of Tipton'. Unfortunately Casaubon's posthumous message is labelled *Instructions to Mrs. Casaubon for 'The Key to all Mythologies'*, not *Synoptical Tabulation for the Use of Mrs. Casaubon*. The dusky portrait of one of Sir James's ancestors, a Crusader, is in the same category. Interestingly, it is only in a 'document' (I:0.56.03) that we see a rare smiling face, the tiny painting of Casaubon's sister.

Subtle equivalence is sometimes achieved. Farebrother's touching farewell to Mary Garth

is framed by Eliot with a concluding sentence: 'In three minutes the Vicar was on horse-back again, having gone magnanimously through a duty much harder than the renunciation of whist, or even than the writing of penitential meditations.' The BBC *Middlemarch* expresses Eliot's lack of sentiment by a prompt cut (II:1.05.49) to a piano jig at the hands of Rosamond. The style of this version does not really derive from cinematics, which are technically rather clumsy: Mrs. Cadwallader pronounces on madness mostly out of the frame, the same track through the high street is put to regular service, and a crane appears only to have been rented for the last day's shooting. 'Dutch interiors' are emulated, in lighting, but not set-dressing: there are few *things*, decorative or symbolic. Excepting the documents we do not learn much about what people handled in 1832. But the costumes (Anushka Nieradzik) are stylishly conceived and knowledgeable. The Vincys appear as they do to Mrs. Cadwallader, a 'set of jugs'. Lydgate has 'every requisite of perfect dress', of careful colourings, compared to the uniform-like upper-class garb of Sir James and Brooke. There is an extraordinary moment (II:2.22.59) of Mrs. Bulstrode in her shift taking her jewels from her bare shoulders.

'Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague', wrote George Eliot. 'The true seeing is within, and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection'. This is not forgotten in the BBC *Middlemarch* which shows some awareness of the need to compensate for the tyranny of the visual. It can be good when stylized, as in the remarkable staged posture (II:2.25.15) of Dorothea in her last conversation with Lydgate. Farebrother's wonderful, Orwellianly plain face and precise animation are remarkable. There is good book-illustration at large among the tradesmen. But Brooke is a disappointment. Robert Hardy has done great Englishmen down the years, but this Brooke recalls one of the very earliest versions: an Old Vic Sir Andrew Aguecheek in the 1950s. 'I read a book once'? Though one of the *Middlemarch* fallen Titans, Brooke is not a ninny. He has an affinity with Ladislav (in his 'neutrality'), something which the relentless fogginess of Hardy allows us to forget.