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## Review of The Mill on the Floss

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### ***The Mill on the Floss, BBC 1, 1 January 1997***

In this lamentably impoverished adaptation by Hugh Stoddart (directed by Graham Theakston), a character identified as Sophy Deane (played by Joanna David) masqueraded as one of three Dodson sisters. That George Eliot created a unit of four sisters is of minor consequence, since their individuality apparently merited so little concern that it was deemed fitting to amalgamate the lachrymose Sophy Pullet with Lucy Deane's mother, Susan - an expedient that, instead of giving us two for the price of one, merely effaced them both. In effect, every opportunity to avoid the danger of distinguishing one sister from another appeared to have been taken. No large buckram sleeves, fashionably immense shoulders, or architectural bonnet defined Mrs Pullet, since there was no Mrs Pullet. Gone with Mrs Tulliver's plumpness were her fan-shaped cap and the bunches of unmatronly blond curls so disapproved of by Mrs Glegg - and nowhere in evidence were that senior sister's pointedly reproving false fuzzy 'front', ill-fitting tippet, and '*chevaux-de-frise*': like their costumes, the sisters we were presented with were virtually interchangeable.

The ironing out of so many of the women's sartorial idiosyncracies was symptomatic of this production's unresponsiveness both to George Eliot's purposeful particularity, and to the social comedy that is the crucial context of her depiction of childhood suffering. The depletion and dilution of Maggie's and Tom's family (no Mrs Pullet inevitably meant no Mr Pullet with his musical snuff-box) characterized the depletion and dilution of the novel as a whole. There was no defeated and depressed husband for Aunt Gritty (Shenagh Govan), no wife for Mr Stelling (Peter Gunn), and there were no gypsies for the child Maggie to run away to. Dr Kenn was likewise dispensed with, and so - even more astonishingly - was Bob Jakin, who in the novel plays so significant a part in Maggie's life. No Bob Jakin meant, of course, no Mumps, his singular dog; but then, there was no Yap for the young Tom and Maggie, and no Minnie or menagerie for Lucy. But why should we have looked for pets, however much they contribute to the life of the novel, when there was no Garum Firs (because no Pullet) with its exotic farmyard creatures; when there was no sight, sense, or sound of beasts in fields, birds in hedgerows, or fowls in yards - no animals but a few horses to evoke the teeming life of the Tulliver world?

Although there was an attempt to encapsulate Maggie's inherent dreaminess by showing her lying in a drifting boat throughout the opening credits sequence, the articulacy, observant intelligence, and intellectual curiosity of the child were not established. There was little indication of her development, or of the vicissitudes of her inward struggle after her family's downfall: her grief, yearning, frustration, and Kempis-inspired renunciations were accounted for in a couple of disjointed statements made to Lucy (Lucy Whybrow) in a trumped-up scene that was inserted before the disrupted relationship between Maggie (Emily Watson) and Philip (James Frain) was resumed.

But what relationship? As depicted, the childhood friendship might have been a just about adequate preparation for a dramatization of the novel's secretly-conducted meetings among the

tree- and dog-rose covered hollows of the Red Deepes. Approached through a group of Scotch firs, this setting is intensely important, both to the otherwise confined and self-depriving Maggie, and to her author's analysis of the forces within her. In the television version, however, Philip tracked Maggie down to a decrepit carriage-shed or stable where, awkwardly and preposterously cooped, they had conversations that, like most of the exchanges in this production, failed utterly to evolve *as* conversations. Here they were discovered by Tom. He insulted Philip's deformity, right enough, but Maggie's screeched, modern 'Stop it!', instead of her original, convulsed 'Tom, I will not bear it - I will listen no longer', coarsened her character. Causing - or allowing - her to rain violent blows on her brother after he had wrenched her away from Philip (in the novel, her physical violence here is confined to the way she snatches her hand away from Tom's grasp) while she shrieked gabbled recriminations, denied her her outraged dignity. Why should this behaviour have been considered an improvement on the certainly vehement, but coherent, utterance George Eliot gives her?

Maggie's delayed reaction of half-acknowledged relief at the enforced separation would have been much to look for, but some gradations of feeling might have been expected. Instead, when Maggie and Philip were reunited at Lucy Deane's, they got straight down to the nitty-gritty of where they were in the scheme of things. No vocal feebleness expressed his intense emotion: he passed swiftly from ticking her off for wishing to escape pain, to asking her rather gaily whether something had happened (she'd secretly fallen in love with Stephen). At no point was there anything to suggest that the idea of marriage to Philip might make her shiver.

The relationship between Lucy and Stephen Guest (James Weber-Brown) fared no better. Visiting Lucy, Stephen patronizingly praised Mrs Tulliver for keeping Mr Deane's house very well, and, having been implausibly addressed by Lucy as 'My love' (she even more anachronistically referred to her aunt simply as 'Bessy'), was instantly informed of cousin Maggie's arrival before plonking himself at the piano as though to get the business of music-making and courtship over and done with.

The laws of attraction (so irresistible in the novel) were equally summarily demonstrated. His compliment to Maggie on first beholding her having been self-righteously snubbed, Lucy proposed without more ado that they all go on the river - whereupon Maggie bossily informed Stephen before stepping into the boat that she would like to row, gratuitously warning him that, if she tried something, she must do well at it. And so it went charmlessly on.

This unsubtle treatment of social intercourse and sexual tension undermined all narrative purpose. Maggie's struggle to resist Stephen's love and consciously-exerted power went, like all her struggles in the film, for very little - perhaps because, in the film, there was so little to resist.

The last minutes on the screen were sublimely farcical. After Maggie had burnt her acquiescent reply to Stephen's voice-over letter of reproach, no sense was conveyed of hours spent watching for the dawn light - of her sorrow, battle with renewed temptation, and despair. Instead, we saw her blissfully asleep in bed, oblivious of the flood-water swirling about the

room. Not until all the furniture was afloat, and the water waist-high, did she awake, rise, climb out of the window into a conveniently accessible boat, and push out into the storm. She was next seen rowing over calm waters under a clear sky. Tom's descent into the flood by a hoist that proved to be unsecured, was ludicrous – the climactic tragedy no more than a melodramatic bungling.

One scene, however, was dramatically convincing: Mr Tulliver (Bernard Hill) thrashed Lawyer Wakem (Nicholas Gecks) with frenzied, truly satisfying vengefulness. In the main, though, this clearly underfunded enterprise resulted in neither a literal transposition from page to screen (impossible in one sitting), nor a liberated interpretation of the book. For that, we can at least be grateful for Helen Edmundson's stage adaptation (first produced in 1994) which, economically yet imaginatively mounted by the energetic, inventive Shared Experience Theatre, was to be seen at theatres from Stratford-on-Avon to London during 1995. For the screen, George Eliot's great novel needs, and deserves, the kind of sympathetic resourcefulness that Giles Foster brought to his direction of Louis Marks's moving adaptation of her *Silas Marner* (BBC, 1988).

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