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REVIEW

by Beryl Gray

THE MILL ON THE FLOSS,

Dramatized for BBC Radio 4

by Michelene Wandor (5 episodes in April and May 1991)

In the radio dramatization of a novel, it is left to the actors to persuade us that they are the individuals whose roles they undertake, but it remains the responsibility of the scriptwriter to select and organize those roles with respect for the overall vision of the originating artist. How well, then, did Radio Four's recent five-episode dramatization of *The Mill on the Floss* serve George Eliot?

It is axiomatic that, without Maggie Tulliver, there would be no *Mill on the Floss*; but, in this most autobiographical of George Eliot's novels, it is not Maggie who is omnipresent, but the narrator. Though Maggie is the protagonist, it is the narrator's spirit that pervades; the narrator's voice that compels - that guides us into the intimately known, sensuously remembered, and possessively loved locality of Dorlcote, and draws attention to the rapt little girl who is to be the story's heroine. Why, then, were the lachrymose introductory tones (perhaps intended to sound dreamy, merely) in this production those of a male? We had to wait until Episode Two for the answer. George Eliot's narrator had been eliminated, and Philip Wakem - Maggie's sensitive, deformed, and highly partial friend, absent for long tracts of the novel - promoted to fulfil her office.

This depressing device automatically dispensed both with George Eliot's epic scope, and with the ironic perspective within which she holds Philip himself. From the outset, then, it was apparent that, in the case of this production, to dramatize meant to diminish. But we could still hope that some of the life in the novel would be transmitted.

Well, the aunts and uncles retained their comi-tragic, petty righteousness, and some of their individuality; but the absence of the authorial, extenuating voice resulted in a subtraction from the decency which, though narrow, is theirs. Michael Fitzgerald was much more persuasive when he could be Philip, Maggie's suitor, instead of Philip, the preposterously omniscient narrator. Sylvestre le Touzel as the older Maggie conveyed little of her character's inherent playfulness, but she was admirably coherent and convincing in her earnestness. Hilary Martin as the child Maggie, though, was a disaster: rude, bad-tempered, whinging, flat, and incoherent. And why

was an adult (Richard Pearce) expected to be able to imitate the twelve or thirteen-year-old Tom? The attempt at a suitable pitch and quality of voice - at the emphases of boyhood - was embarrassing, and inevitably demeaning to the actor and his part. Both these gained authority as Tom grew up, however - though the imposed "regionalism" (the frequent dropping of aitches, the reference to "me ooncle", and so forth) undermined the rather pedagogic precision with which George Eliot invests him.

Nicholas Gilbrook's voice was too light for Stephen Guest, whose full-toned baritone is meant to be a potent force; an enticement. His bantering with Lucy Deane (Moir Leslie, rightly refusing to be insipid) was well caught, but what could possibly be gained by having the pair sing (in unison) Morley's setting of "O Mistress mine" instead of George Eliot's pointed choice of "Graceful Consort", Adam and Eve's duet from Haydn's *Creation*? Was Haydn considered to be too highbrow? Too ecstatic? Or simply too subtle? Whatever the reason for the replacement, it typified the way music was used throughout the five episodes - dully incorporated without respect for George Eliot's ear, or understanding of her purpose. And so, instead of the stirring duet (from Auber's *Masaniello*) that, in the novel, undoes Maggie's emotions, we were treated to Lucy and Stephen singing "O Mistress mine" again. Although nothing could have been less impassioned than this homely (and, with Lucy's contribution, unsuitable) rendition of Feste's song, the Maggie with whom we were presented was unstable enough utterly to succumb to its purported influence, and to the purported power of Stephen's voice.

After this, the relationship between the musical entertainment and Maggie's sensibility only got sillier, with reprises - in various voices - of Wither's "Shall I wasting in despair" proffered in place both of the plaintive Bellini aria with which the saucy song is meant to contrast, and of the glorious music from *The Tempest* (Purcell's, the Victorians thought) which masks Stephen's advances to Maggie. This trivialising meant that, instead of the understanding that George Eliot elicits from the *reader* of Maggie's hunger for music - for more life, more love - the *listener* remained remote from her experiences. Something of the passion between Stephen and Maggie was certainly ultimately transmitted, but the whole progress of their mutual attraction, and of her inward struggle, both before and after Mudport, was so attenuated, that the heroine emerged as painfully moralistic rather than "large-souled"; incapable of the joy for which in fact she yearns. Her death with Tom was therefore a release; not a tragedy.