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## Review of Felix Holt, the Radical

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Lucy Bailey

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***Felix Holt, the Radical*, adapted by Michael Eaton and directed by Lucy Bailey  
BBC Radio 4 (3 parts: 24 June, 1 July, and 8 July, 2007)**

*Felix Holt*, with its large cast of characters, and above all with its notoriously complicated legal plot, presents a real challenge when adapting and reducing it for a three hour, serialized radio dramatization. Michael Eaton is to be congratulated on neatly simplifying the plot, by omitting Thomas Trounsem's sale of his rights to Durfey and the exchange of names between Bycliffe and Scaddon. Admittedly this left a few loose ends, and listeners might have been puzzled by the name Scaddon, mentioned without explanation, but on the whole the necessary simplification was skilfully done and the main plot threads made clear.

Inevitably the slow character and plot development characteristic of George Eliot have to be sacrificed. Such subtleties as the gradual development of Harold's character from assertive bullying to growing human sympathy through his love for Esther, ending in the total collapse of his confidence when he discovers who he is, had to be sacrificed entirely. Listeners familiar with the book will miss this subtlety, but the adaptor makes some decisions that are helpful in guiding first-timers, and/or in making contrasts sharp. An example of this is the wish expressed (in Part 2 of the radio version) to Mrs Transome by Jermyn (Jack Shepherd) that Harold Transome would 'find a place for me in his heart'. This is emotionally more direct, and cruder, than Jermyn's portrayal in the novel, cautious and slippery, but it is helpful in suggesting the past liaison of Jermyn and Mrs Transome. Another example concerns the personalities of Esther (played by Hayley Atwell) and Felix (Elliot Cowan). In the novel, at their first meeting, Felix finds Esther's Byron, and vehemently expresses his disapproval. The radio dramatization adds a later exchange in which Esther's answer to Felix's question as to what she's reading is: 'Rousseau's *Confessions* – did you think it would be *Pilgrim's Progress*?' It may seem unlikely that a Minister's daughter would be reading Rousseau's *Confessions* in the 1830s, particularly a girl portrayed (until later in the book) as rather frivolous, but it expands on the contrast between the two, and is perhaps prepared for by the fact that we are told, only in the radio dramatization, that Esther (whose mother was French and who teaches French), has recently returned from Paris.

The method chosen for the radio dramatization was to reduce the novel to very short snatches of dialogue, sometimes sticking pretty closely to the novel, with a small amount of narrative background left to Rufus Lyon and Esther. The quick transitions from one scene to the next were at times hard to follow. At the very beginning, for instance, the alternating conversations between Mrs Transome (Susan Wooldridge) and Harold (Jasper Britton), and Felix and his mother (Susan Brown) – in their case to the accompaniment of breaking medicine bottles – might have confused the unprepared listener.

The biggest loss is inevitably that of George Eliot's authorial commentary, particularly important in the case of Mrs Transome. However, this means that first time radio listeners, having had the benefit of a vivid and well-dramatized sense of the main characters and conflicts, with a clear plot outline, will find great enrichment and depth if they go on to read the novel.

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