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THE MILL ON THE FLOSS ON THE BBC IN 1978

By Catherine Brown

The 2010 London conference on *The Mill on the Floss* was designedly conscious of its distance in time from its subject – this distance being measurable by a round number. It was as important to keep in mind, however, the distance between the novel's composition and its setting. As it happens, this was the same as that between the conference and the 1978 BBC TV adaptation of the novel on which this paper reflects.¹ For Eliot, the temporal setting corresponded to her childhood, as it would have done for some of her readers, and as will also be true of 1978 for some readers of this article. For others 1978 corresponds to a period of adulthood, whilst for others it precedes consciousness. This variable inevitably affects viewers' responses to the serial: those in whose adulthood it was made will have a wider and deeper empirical understanding of its context than anyone else – but it will also be wider and deeper than Eliot's own understanding of the period in which her novel is set. Eliot's acute consciousness of this distance may have been inflected by her anxiety about underestimating the otherness of a period which she did not see with mature eyes. By contrast, our own awareness of our distance in time from the serial is likely to be relatively dull, since the program-makers were doing their best to efface their presence and present. They also did their best to efface the distance between 1860 and the 1820s – as a result of which audiences are encouraged to soar over both 1978 and 1860 to land in the 1820s, where they are invited to relax in their modern sofas and feel at home. Although 1978 was on the threshold of the take-off decade for English costume dramas, British audiences had already begun to be accustomed to the preceding century, in the eighteenth-teens of *War and Peace* (BBC, dir. David Conroy, 1972), the eighteen-forties of *Vanity Fair* (BBC, dir. David Giles, 1967), and the eighteen-seventies of *Anna Karenina* (British Lion Films, dir. Julien Duvivier, 1948).

This o'erleaping of the time in which artistic creation actually occurred is only made possible – insofar as it is – by the excision of Eliot's narrator. This narrator keeps the readers of 1860 constantly aware of their distance from the events narrated, partly in order to invite and indulge, and rather more in order to satirize, a self-satisfied amusement at the 1820s equivalent of flares and large sideburns in male fashion. In *The Mill* it is female fashions which are the targets: Mrs Glegg's use of fuzzy curled fronts on weekdays in order to save her glossy curled front for Sundays is merely ridiculed, whereas when Maggie submits 'to have the abundant black locks plaited into a coronet on the summit of her head, after the pitiable fashion of those antiquated times', a similar kind of ridicule is parodied (p. 294).² Either way, Eliot's younger readers, and such readers as Eliot imagined she might have in the future, are educated in what the fashions of those times actually were, and reminded of the past's nature as a place in which things are differently done.

The adaptation, wishing to downplay such estrangement, eschews fronts, and has the actresses playing the Dodsens wear what is or is meant to appear to be their own hair, neatly arranged. This is no peculiarity of 1970s historicism; reconstructions by and of most periods avoid the aspects of the represented found most repellent by the representers. No heroine of a Jane Austen adaptation after Austen's own period has ever worn, or appeared to wear, white make-up over lead-eaten skin, nor mouse-skin patches in place of eyebrows. The adaptation

does reveal its historical particularity, however, in distinctly 1970s haircuts on the younger and the older Tom, and occasional traces of eyeshadow on Maggie. The film's tint, too, belongs to that decade: shades of brown predominate, and the boldest colours are pastels, despite the fact that the novel uses the word *bright* fifty times, often in application to colour. Today, this may accentuate the adaptation's age if one assumes that the reel has yellowed, or that bright colours could not be achieved by 1970s technology, or that shades were chosen to fit with the decorative tastes of that decade. It is more likely, however, that sepia colours were considered by the 1970s to be those in which the 1820s were lived, or in which the 1820s should at this distance be represented, or which are appropriate to an adaptation of *The Mill on the Floss* amongst novels, or to the particular interpretation of it which they wished to dramatize.

Once certain clues have pointed to the period of the production, other circumstantial features begin to assert themselves. The very existence of an adaptation of Eliot in the nineteen-seventies is indicative of the post-war revival in her critical fortunes which owed much to F. R. Leavis and Gordon S. Haight. As John Holloway noted in 1953, 'The fashion for thinking that in Victorian culture there was nothing of any value, nothing which does not warrant supercilious exposure, is happily passing'.³ By 1965 Haight was able to note that 'Her reputation has now risen to the point where many authorities place her again in the very top rank of English novelists'.⁴ The television adaptations of Eliot which began with the 1978 *Mill* themselves fed into a revival of interest in her novels, many of which were reprinted in the 1980s. Nonetheless, it is striking that *The Mill* was chosen by the BBC for its first Eliot adaptation at a time when the late great novels had largely replaced the two earliest at the peak of critical favour. One possible reason is that in the decade of second-wave feminism, and the entry of women of Maggie's intellectual calibre into all of the universities in the country, the novel of Eliot's which complained most about the position of women had particular relevance. Stelling's reassurance to Tom that girls have 'a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow', and Tom's emblematic 'I always have half-sovereigns and sovereigns for my Christmas boxes because I shall be a man, and you only have five-shilling pieces, because you're only a girl', are quoted exactly in the adaptation, and fit with the feminism of the decade (pp. 150, 35). On the other hand, a feminist perspective is no more stressed in the adaptation than in the novel, which had been criticized by some feminist critics for not providing a female role model whose achievements match Eliot's own. By the later 1970s this critique had softened, and in 1976 Zelda Austen examined 'Why Feminists are Angry with George Eliot', responding with the suggestion that they should be less so.⁵ Nor does the adaptation foreshadow the arguments of following year's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar), that Eliot's internalized patriarchy led to a self-loathing which was expressed as violence, and that her apparent conservatism was in fact defensive against her passions. Indeed, one moment in the adaptation provoked my own, slight, feminist wince. After Maggie has returned, wet, from Mudport to St Oggs, her mother receives her warmly, and we see her wrapped in a towel having her hair brushed. For the only time in the adaptation Maggie is distinctly sexualized, as though in conformity with the scandal which now attaches to her. In the scene before we had seen her fully clothed, sleeping in a chair, separate from Stephen; the subsequent scene hints at the congruence between the wish to believe the worst of Maggie, and lubricious pleasure in the imagining thereof (episode 8: 6m).

Similarly, although *The Mill's* provincialism fitted well with the cultural politics of a period in which the BBC was rapidly relinquishing its role as Britain's centralizing cultural force, class politics are not stressed by the adaptation. Mr Tulliver's stubborn response to a perceived injustice, which is defeated by the power of the law and leads to the ruin of his family, had obvious resonance in a year characterized by trade union strikes culminating in a 'Winter of Discontent'. However, the presentation of the Tullivers' ruin has no particular emphasis or political inflection, any more than the novel itself is directed at the particular concerns of England in 1860; both the novel and its adaptation have a sense of responsibility to what came before (by comparison, the 1997 BBC film of the novel dwells more on the ruin, even though it has less time in which to develop any theme). Nor does the adaptation – like most people in 1978 – show any sense of anticipation of the huge economic and social changes which were to be initiated by Margaret Thatcher in the year which followed. These included changes in society at large, the BBC, and its literary adaptations, which are observable in the differences between the slow-moving, gently lit, dramatic, sexually-reticent *Mill* which opened the BBC Eliot series in 1978, and the fast-paced, sunlit, cinematic, and relatively undemanding *Middlemarch* of 1994 (changes not, however, typified by the *Mill* film, which is more complex).

Of course, there is much in any work of art which is not interpretable in terms of its historic context, and the adapters of *The Mill* take several decisions which are of more interest in literary critical than historical terms. For example, the narrator is not rendered through voiceover, but replaced by heterodiegetic music – in particular one rustic, sympathetic, wistful, ultimately comedic tune played on a flute, which recurs throughout. After Tom interrupts Philip playing the piano, is abused by Philip, and abuses him in return, Philip tries to continue playing, but falters, stops, and breaks down in tears: a heterodiegetic flute takes over the tune with which he could not continue, like an angel of which he cannot be aware (episode 3: 10m20s). In the novel, the narrator comments that Mrs Stelling 'found him sitting in a heap on the hassock, and crying bitterly' (p. 173). She is not sympathetic, but the narrator which tells us this fact, is; the flute, lacking words, cannot offer this analysis, but can provide the sympathy which is equally inaccessible to Philip himself. At other times the narrator is translated into a visual mode. In place of the narrator's reflections on Tom's greater aptitude for practical things than intellectual ones, we see him stroking a painting of a horse – in contrast to Philip, who is shown drawing horses. As the credits roll at the beginning of each of the episodes we see the mill on the Floss; this both illustrates the novel's title and performs a similar function to the repeated references to the Floss and floods which forewarn the reader of the novel of its catastrophe. The adaptation gives frequent visual close-ups of animals (including a bulldog, pigs, and frogs) which also have verbal equivalents in Eliot's prose.

The paradoxes of perspective of the novel's first chapter, 'Outside Dorlcote Mill', are resolved in the adaptation. The narrator describes what he sees as he walks along the Floss, then comments at the end of the first paragraph: 'I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge' (p. 7). The reader is unsure why one should or can 'remember' where one is. This is only explained at the end of the chapter, when he rests his arms 'on the cold stone of this bridge' before announcing 'Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago' (pp. 8-9). Like

the foregrounding of the narrator at the novel's opening, the view of the Floss at the beginning of each episode has the effect of confessing the adaptation to be a representation of events from a consistent narrative perspective, rather than the events themselves. However, since the narrator's voice is absent there is no disjunction between the present tense of seeing and the past tense of memory; since we actually witness a representation of the past there is no contradiction between sitting in an armchair and seeing the Mill with our own eyes, as there is for the narrator. In fact, the narrator's position is impossible. He claims: 'Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlor, on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of' (p. 9). When, then, has he narrated the dream which precedes? If his arms are numb, how can he have been writing to us? If dreaming, how speaking to us? If speaking, how can he have the stamina to narrate the rest of the novel, or we to listen? The extent of his percipience is erratic: he is able to tell us the thoughts of the waggoner, but not of his beasts; he 'should like well to hear them neigh over their hardly earned feed of corn', but cannot follow them beyond his line of sight – although in the next chapter he hears the conversation of the Tullivers in their parlour (p. 8). The narrative panning shot described in 'Now I can turn my eyes towards the mill again, and watch the unresting wheel sending out its diamond jets of water' enforces a real physical perspective which is lost in the narration of the rest of the novel – whereas the adaptation's camera has no humanity or corresponding limits attributed to it (p. 8). At the opening of her second novel Eliot is teasing at the conventions of omniscient narration in a manner which could have been reproduced by voiceover, or by the stronger *Verfremdungseffekt* of showing one camera by another, had the adaptation's creators been more influenced by the post-structuralist criticism which had recently been directed towards Eliot's work.⁶

One effect towards which the novel strives can be more easily rendered on film than on the page: that of simultaneity. When the Tullivers visit the Pullets at Garum Firs in Book 1, Chapter 9, the novel's narrative focus switches between different constellations of characters, with some indications that their experiences overlap: 'With Tom the interval [of inspection of Mrs Pullet's bonnet] had seemed still longer, for he had been seated in irksome constraint on the edge of a sofa directly opposite his uncle Pullet' (p. 91). In the adaptation the cuts between groups of characters imply simultaneity more implicitly and decisively, by their frequency, and resumption of scenes at the moment of departure from them – to considerable comic effect. See, for example, the switches between the adults and the children in episode 2: 2m30s.

Adaptations inevitably impose their own structures on a work of fiction. Serial adaptation can in some cases reproduce the effect of original serial publication – but since *The Mill on the Floss*, at Eliot and Lewes's insistence, had gone straight to three-volume publication, the experience of waiting for a new instalment of *The Mill on the Floss* is not a Victorian one. Eliot divided her novel into books and chapters, both of which are named. In this it differs from both *Adam Bede*, which names its chapters but not its books, and all of the later novels, which name their books but not their chapters. The adaptation resembles *Adam Bede* in numbering its episodes, and the 2006 DVD version does so still more closely by dividing each into named chapters. Numbered, unnamed, large-scale parts resemble the acts of a play, of which one expects certain kinds of action to occur in the first, and certain other kinds in the last. From *The Mill on the Floss* onwards, however, Eliot chose to further characterize these phases by names; the adaptation's refusal to do the same removes one potential reminder of a shaping authorial

presence. Whereas the novel's seven books are various in length, and contain between three and thirteen chapters each, the eight episodes are of equal length and contain five chapters each – a regularity which recalls that of serial instalments. The adaptation's chapter titles are for the most part simply indicative, or else quotations from the novel ('The Little Wench', p. 12) or television script ('Summat Bad'). They involve none of the mock-heroic tone of 'The Aunts and Uncles are coming' or 'Enter the Aunts and Uncles'; 'Maggie tries to run away from her Shadow' becomes simply 'Running Away' and 'The Gypsies'. A few, however, are felicitous – for example 'Drilling and Drawing'; 'The Last Conflict' becomes 'Nothing to do but Pray', 'The Nature of Forgiveness', and 'Forgiven'.

Several characters are simplified in the direction of caricature – notably Mr Stelling, who is represented as middle-aged, dry, and pompous (precisely as I had misremembered him after my first reading of the novel), rather than blonde, broad-chested, in highly-sexed early marriage, energetic, ambitious, and obtuse (the 1997 film places him somewhere inbetween – young and portly). Altogether, the older generation is made too old – particularly the women. Even supposing that Mrs Tulliver and Mrs Deane married late, they are represented as rather too old to have children of the age of Maggie and Lucy at the beginning of the series. This is a common feature of costume dramas which concern the passage of young people towards marriage; even when the girls are marrying in their late teens, their mothers are almost never represented as in their thirties, with sexual lives and romantic tensions of their own – but rather their fifties or even sixties, and by implication safely beyond such possibilities. An honourable exception is the 1997 film of the novel, in which the sisters are young and attractive (Cheryl Campbell plays Mrs Tulliver), but it downplays their importance, reduces their number, and takes them far more seriously than the novel itself does. In the serial, by contrast, the aspects of the Dodson sisters which are ridiculed in the novel are exaggerated by their age on screen. Other subtleties in the novel's characterization are lost; the mother is made a sympathetic contrast to all of her sisters; Tom is not feminized into a nursemaid of the Stellings' child; and most distortingly, Maggie's religion, and most of her other reading, is excised – as it is also in the film.

A few changes are made in the direction of the dramatic, as befits a dramatization: Tom *discovers* Maggie and Philip together at the Red Deeps, rather than taking Maggie along with him to confront Philip. Stephen's kissing of Maggie in the conservatory at the ball moves from the arm such as, on the Parthenon, 'clasps lovingly the timeworn marble of a headless trunk', to the mouth (p. 441). Maggie rescues Tom from the river rather than the land. Philip waits in the background whilst Mrs Tulliver attends to Maggie's grave, holding a red rose. The transition between the younger and older actors playing Tom Tulliver is performed during a fencing bout with Mr Poulter. Here a change which is not necessary in a novel, and might have been achieved more discreetly between episodes, is whimsically acknowledged as necessary artifice (episode 3: 3m29s; the 1997 film uses the surtitle 'Seven Years Later' during an episode). Yet Philip is played by Anton Lesser throughout – implicitly acknowledging his prematurity and melancholy as a child, and lack of manliness and virginity as an adult. One dimension of character which is harder to render in narrative than drama is accent; unless non-standard spellings are used by an author, readers tend to mentally hear all narration and speeches in their own accent. In this respect adaptations can provide helpful reminders of social context. In the *Mill* adaptation Tom's and his parents' accents remain the same throughout the series, Lucy's develops steadily in the direction of received pronunciation, and Maggie's

fluctuates. These details reflect the director's interpretation of character: the instability in Maggie's accent reflects, amongst other things, her uncertain allegiance to her family, as opposed to the educated world which Philip represents. The 1997 film, by contrast, gives all of its central characters received pronunciation, and makes the Tulliver family more wealthy and sophisticated than the novel suggests. Certain weaknesses of the novel are, intentionally or otherwise, reflected by the serial – for example, that Maggie's attraction to Stephen, and his to her, lack persuasiveness; Stephen is a far more serious character in the film. One successful addition is made: after the gypsy woman (not the man, as in the novel) has returned Maggie to her father, she concludes the second episode in the foreground of the shot, remarking to herself: 'Ay, it's as well that you don't know what's in store for the little miss; it'd rob you of your sleep'. The sense of fate which surrounds Maggie's and Tom's deaths is thus linked with the gypsies, who in the novel are disconnected from such wider meaning. The scenario of a gypsy foreseeing a catastrophic flood reprises another twentieth-century work strongly influenced by *The Mill on the Floss* – 'The Virgin and the Gypsy', of 1930. This was adapted to television eight years before *The Mill*, when D. H. Lawrence was at the peak of his own post-war popularity, and suggests his critique of the ending of Eliot's novel in its refusal to be a tragedy. The central male and female characters survive, and although their lives after the flood are divided, their bodies and hearts are intact.

As long as readers visit the graveyard at the end of *Wuthering Heights*, Cathy and Heathcliff haunt the Yorkshire moors of their imaginations; as long as they visit the graveyard at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie and Tom are in death 'not divided' (p. 522). A graveyard is an apt location for a novel's ending, not only because it signifies the end of the central characters' lives, but because it is a site of commemoration of those lives, and therefore a metaphor for the novel as a whole. The serial, though not the 1997 film (which ends with a flashback to Maggie and Tom's childhoods) ends here. The perspective from which the narrator writes that 'Nature repairs her ravages, but not all'; 'To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair' might well be 1860, but it encompasses also the indefinite future in which all readers of the novel live. What *is* repaired, even within five years of the flood, is the 'grassy order and decent quiet' of the churchyard. It is certainly the case – although Eliot could not have predicted it – that many graves of the 1830s survived in English country churchyards until 1978, and continue to do so now (pp. 521-22). The gravestones age, as do Victorian novels, television adaptations of them, and academic articles about either – but all are proper places for reflection on, and renewal of, the lives of characters about whom we care.

Notes

- 1 BBC 1978, directed by Ronald Wilson, adapted by James Andrew Hall, 212 minutes: 8 episodes of 26 minutes. With Georgia Slowe (child Maggie), Pippa Guard (adult Maggie), Jonathan Scott-Taylor (child Tom), Christopher Blake (adult Tom), Anton Lesser (Philip), Judy Cornwell (Mrs Tulliver), and Ray Smith (Mr Tulliver). The DVD released in the USA in 1997 (Region 1) is available for purchase online; references will be made to the episode number, minutes, and seconds of this DVD.
- 2 References to the novel in this article are taken from *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, intro. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

- 3 John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1953), pp. 1-2.
- 4 Gordon S. Haight, ed., *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. xiv.
- 5 Zelda Austen, 'Why Feminists are Angry with George Eliot', *College English*, 37 (1976), pp. 549-61.
- 6 See, for example, J. Hillis Miller, 'Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*', in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. J. H. Buckley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 137-60.