ELLEN TERRY

The art of performance and her work in film

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The reputation of Ellen Terry (1847–1928) as an actor is associated with her stage performances at the Lyceum Theatre, London from 1878 to 1902, and in Shakespearean roles, notably Beatrice, Portia and Lady Macbeth. However, in 1916 she ventured into popular cultural performances in film and music hall. It is her film acting at the time of the rise of the film industry in the 1920s in particular which is considered here as a new dimension to the historiography of Terry's career. Nina Auerbach's portrayal of Terry as a 'player in her time' (1987) is further complicated because that 'time' coincided with the new era of film. Terry was more than the sum of her stage roles and she was fully aware of the value of her reputation in the commercial international market of theatrical tours and related merchandising. She privately mocked the publicity photograph depicting her as feminine subordinate under Henry Irving's dominant leadership by annotating it 'Naughty girl!' and her amusement was justified, given her discrete financial involvement in Irving's Lyceum Theatre and the power this vested in her.¹

Ellen Terry's film appearances offer new insights into her performance work. They demonstrate her motivation to diversify from theatre into film, her willingness to adapt creatively and explore a new medium and reach a new audience. This chapter explores some of the contacts Terry made in the new film industry and how that industry used the Ellen Terry brand and its associated cultural prestige to enhance the potential circulation of films in a post-war period of reconstruction in which Englishness had a transatlantic value. Much of Ellen Terry's paid work in her later years has been interpreted as an attempt by mother and daughter to sustain the extended family income (Steen, 1962: 336). Terry's correspondence reveals indeed that the opportunities presented

by the wide appeal of film promised greater commercial success (see Cockin, 2010–15). Although financially unable to retire, Terry was not solely concerned with the much-needed income her film roles brought. She was interested in new technologies generally and specifically in the aesthetic potential of the new medium of film.

With her devoted following and international reputation, Terry was well placed to move into film. Like other stage actors of her generation, she obtained film roles on the basis of her earlier successes in theatre, but she was slower to get involved than Sarah Bernhardt, for instance, who had played Hamlet in a short film as early as 1900 (Gottlieb, 2010). Terry was sceptical about plans to experiment with theatrical productions which were neither financially sound nor informed by a thorough understanding of the likely audience served by the particular theatre venue.² Her private correspondence has revealed extensive evidence of a thoughtful and sustained approach to her acting roles, the extent to which she researched and responded to advice and her involvement in the overall aesthetic design of the production. This thoughtfulness also applied to her professional film work.

As one of the performers associated with the ‘crossover between theatre and cinema’ (Gledhill, 2003: 11), Ellen Terry also brought a reputation as a ‘pictorial’ performer, exemplifying ‘a pictorial style of acting [in which performers made] of themselves living pictures’ (Booth, 1986: 83). With reference to Graham Robertson’s recollection of Terry’s appeal, Michael R. Booth notes the tendency of critics to respond to Terry’s performance in the context of artwork, especially that of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. These self-presentations were neither entirely self-directed nor homogeneous. The pictorial mode lent itself to the conceptualisation of performance in a series of frozen moments or tableaux amenable to the aesthetic of film.³ These pictorial associations also tended to be conventional in gender terms and proved to be a commercial success with the audiences that were drawn to the lavish productions at the Lyceum Theatre. However, there is agency in this feast for the eyes: Terry was prepared to serve herself up for the audience’s gaze. Her popularity in conventionally feminine roles did not deter others from identifying her as a role model for female emancipation. The ‘Womanly Woman’ stage role contrasted with the life she lived offstage; in many ways the one paid for the other. She was also associated for some with the latest figures of female independence and transgression: the New Woman and the Freewoman.⁴ Although Terry was financially independent, her economic circumstances fluctuated and she had many

dependants. So she had good reason to be cautious about the commercial success of her ventures and could not afford to court a reputation for the vulgar or controversial. As long as it was appropriate for the typical audiences of the theatre she was working for, she was always willing to embrace experimentation.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, at a later stage of her career, she was more open-minded than many of her contemporaries as to the viability and aesthetic potential of the new medium of moving pictures. The popularity of film and the consequent development of this new sector of the entertainment industry created new opportunities for work, but posed a threat to some established stage actors who associated it with a popular, commercial rather than artistic medium. In this regard, for instance, Ellen Terry was of a different opinion than her contemporary Madge Kendal, as recalled by George Bernard Shaw:

[Kendal] talked so well and so continually that she never listened, and consequently never learnt anything except her stage parts, with the result that to the day of her quite recent death she spoke of Irving as a ridiculous young pretender, and of the cinema as a vulgar penny gaff with which no self-respecting player could possibly be connected.⁵

Shaw implied that Terry (unlike Kendal) was prepared to listen, learn and adapt herself to new performance challenges. His respect for Terry's breadth of knowledge of the theatrical arts is demonstrated by his extensive consultation with her on the potential difficulties of staging his own plays. Nevertheless, for many actors there were uncertainties about the extent to which the transition from one medium to the other might be achieved successfully. In film the actor's relationship with the audience was fundamentally changed, and new interactions were required as entrepreneurial roles emerged in the expanding fields of film production and marketing.

Actors adapted their acting style for film, and when stage plays were adapted for film significant changes, even additional characters, were sometimes introduced. For instance, in 1916 the film adaptation of A. W. Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* included a prequel, involving the first Mrs Tanqueray, in a new introductory scene. The programme provides a detailed description of these alterations, apparently made with the agreement of the author.⁶ It seems that cinema audiences were presumed to need more prefatory or contextual information with a clear and coherent sequence of determining events in order to make sense

of the plot. One such addition, in 1920, was Terry's role as 'the Widow Bernick' in the film adaptation of Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*.⁷

Ellen Terry's third husband, James Carew, had found little opportunity for acting in British theatres, but after a number of silent features he became a regular in films directed by Cecil Hepworth and Fred Paul.⁸ Carew was so successful in the film industry that by July 1920 Terry was confident that he had relevant networks to use in order to promote the sale of her jewellery. She wrote: 'If you know where Douglas Fairbanks is to be found, do get him to go to the sale of my few Jewels at Christie's & buy something for his Mary & do ask any other very rich people you are acquainted with, to go & do likewise'.⁹ In this letter to Carew, Terry mentioned the suitability of specific items based on her own knowledge of other film actors' work:

Did you see Gertrude E. in "The Eyes of Youth" – She was extraordinarily good in it – now one of my things which are to be sold, is a wonderful snake necklace Indian work – enamel & gold – Just the thing # for Gertrude in that Play! – When she acts the wicked singer – (or Actress) I'll let you know when the Sale is to come off at Christie's = & send you 2 or 3 Catalogues ----

The young Americans love pretty things, & are, most of them, very well off – Is Miss Laurette Taylor wealthy? – if so do send to her – I don't know her personally – but I love her on the Stage as "Peg o'my Heart" she was just a delight = Do your best please Jim to make some of your friends buy something "that once belonged to Ellen Terry" = Look up the Fairbanks if you can = Sale in about 3 weeks = (or 2 may be – !) It is lovely down here – I hope you are well – Love from Nell
Perhaps they will buy The Farm!!¹⁰

At the time of her letter, Terry's financial circumstances had reached a critical point where she was obliged to sell her possessions. Four years earlier, when she made her first film performance, Terry was particularly driven by financial problems to seek whatever employment opportunities were available:

I shd not have done this hard work in my old age, but I had to – !!! to meet my responsibilities – & I thank God I found work to do – it was really Providential in coming my way = & I hope before long to get more employment of the same kind =
Now if only Queen Alexandra wd Command a performance of it – it might make me a rich woman – – Even now = Of course I've very little time now to look forward to, & I must work to the end = .¹¹

Having accepted that retirement was out of the question, Terry was fully aware of her role in sustaining the livelihood of her family and their dependants. So Terry's film performances were self-consciously designed for commercial consumption and the related financial benefits this would bring.

From *Her Greatest Performance* to wartime work on screen

Terry's first film role was auspiciously entitled *Her Greatest Performance* (1916). Terry's nephew, Denis Neilson-Terry, and her daughter, Edith Craig, appeared with her in this film. It was produced by Fred Paul for the Ideal Film Company, whose managers, Harry and Simon Rowson, were described by Terry as 'delightful chaps – kind – & keen'.¹² From the outset, Terry was working with the British leaders of the new industry. Over the next decade, Simon Rowson was to become a highly influential expert on the film industry.¹³ The extant footage from *Her Greatest Performance* gives an insight into the serious approach of the film-maker to social commentary. It shows a scene of squalid circumstances, where Edith Craig as the dresser to the famous actress is seen wretchedly moving about in a state of restless anguish.

Her Greatest Performance was marketed by the New York company Cosmofotofilm, together with three other British films, *The Lyons Mail*, *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Lady Windermere's Fan*, guaranteeing 'handsome distribution profits' based on the 'stars and plays whose names are household words wherever the English language is spoken' (quoted in Slide, 2005: 10). In this illustrious list, which included Sir John Hare, Irene Rooke and H. B. Irving, Ellen Terry's name appears in confirmation that her brand had continued to hold its value in the international marketing of film distribution. Anthony Slide notes that it was on the basis of these five stars that *The Bohemian Girl* (1922), directed by Harley Knoles, was also marketed by the American Releasing Corporation, and that it had 'reputation values and drawing power over millions of Americans' (Slide, 2005: 10). Terry's film work therefore successfully reached a transatlantic audience at a time when competition was extremely fierce.

For Terry, *Her Greatest Performance* was one job in a very busy schedule:

I have been overworking myself frightfully – First in acting here, there & everywhere for the dear Imperial Troops, & then in accepting an engagement to act for the Cinema – which by the way proved very interesting

to me = Edy acted with me – & my brother Fred's boy Dennis Neilson Terry – & for a month we “went at it hammer & tongs –” & it's a success they say.¹⁴

The acting techniques in *Her Greatest Performance* were different from customary stage conventions. Terry was surprised to find film acting technically easier since she was not required to use her always vulnerable voice. The experience of film acting constituted a different order of reality for her: ‘Altho’ after the *real* acting on the stage where the only real difficulty *begins* with the *Voice*, it seemed to me mere child's [*sic*] play = & not acting at all.’¹⁵ In practical terms, she was overwhelmed by the intensity of the long hours and the oppressiveness of the studio environment:

All the same it was precious fatigueing [*sic*] – The light was blinding, & gave me sever [*sic*] headaches nearly all the time – & every scrap of air was shut out of the Studio – then for one month the hours were from 10 until 6 in the evening – altho’ there were pauses for luncheon & a delicious Tea = A few days we were lucky enough to have the scene laid out o’ doors – in the gardens of some various friends of mine – & of the Company = of course that was delightful, & we were treated & honoured splendidly – .¹⁶

Terry's account does not merely express her bemusement. It also acknowledges this existential moment, watching her own image on screen and the audience's reaction to it: ‘Everyone who saw the Private Show given for me to see, loved it, & cheered & applauded all the time as if it were really me acting – most amusing – & gratifying =’.¹⁷ This seems to have been Terry's first encounter with the mediatised world of film. She acknowledged the difference in value – whether aesthetic or representational – between the moving and the static image: ‘I must send you a few of the photographs – but remember they don't *Count* by the side of the moving pictures =’.¹⁸ This particular letter marks Terry's experience of a historical turning point, visualised as stage meets screen in her gaze. The emphasis in her description of the experience is on a perception of the audience's interaction with her screen image and her profound sense of recognition of herself in a representation. The subjunctive tense (‘as if it were really me acting’) highlights Terry's sense of alienation.

Ellen Terry appeared in the wartime film *Victory and Peace* (1918), directed by Herbert Brenon for the National War Aims Committee and Ministry of Information. In a tragic scene, she features as the mother receiving a telegram informing her of the fate of one of her sons. The

action draws on familiar iconography from Bamforth & Co. picture postcards which showed the impact of war casualties on the family, notably on the mother. The scene in *Victory and Peace* shows Terry, like the mothers in the postcards, in the act of reading the official news of death or missing in action. Terry's own family were not exempt from wartime fears; her grandson Philip was on military service and her son was in Italy. Terry played her part in 'acting for the tender Imperial troops'¹⁹ and became embedded in the popular imagination of London's wartime audiences from her performances at the Coliseum, run by Oswald Stoll. In June 1920, when Vesta Tilley retired, a farewell event was held at the Coliseum, with reminders of wartime performances as Terry provided the feminine gravitas to contrast with Tilley's famous cross-dressed performance in military uniform.²⁰

At the same venue, Terry was a regular at charity events, often in scenes from Shakespeare, especially those of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*.²¹ These were predictably successful with audiences who would be glad to pay to see her appear on the stage at all, and they arguably served to raise the tone of the Coliseum's programme. Terry's popularity with the Coliseum audience was demonstrated in 1918 by the presentation of a wreath from 'Admirers of Shakespeare at the Coliseum' to mark her birthday.²² As part of the wartime charity and fundraising entertainments, Ellen Terry's performances in scenes and recitations at this time have hitherto been regarded in terms of the diminished capacities of an ageing performer motivated by commercial gain. A few lines constituted all she could manage and reflected the exploitation of a frail older woman beyond the point where sustained employment was feasible. By contrast, Terry's brief accounts of her film work in this period demonstrate that she continued to take performance seriously. She approached it with an aesthetic appreciation of the medium and contemplated potential innovations.

The Bohemian Girl

The circumstances of post-war reconstruction appear to have influenced the films in which Ellen Terry appealed to a sense of nostalgia, and evoked a suffering femininity as a vehicle of service to home and nation. In this context, Terry's final film role as a minor but pivotal character in *The Bohemian Girl* (1922) has wider international cultural and political implications in the post-war period when the film was made. Audiences familiar with the opera of the same name, first performed at

Drury Lane in 1843, would recognise the plot concerning a child's abduction by gypsies and subsequent reunion with her aristocratic family.²³ Richard Schoch has noted the 'diverse positions occupied by Bohemia in Victorian theatrical culture' including the burlesques of *The Bohemian Girl* opera in the 1860s and 1870s (Schoch, 2003: 10). The 1922 film had a special resonance for its post-war audience. It spends considerable time on the individuation of various gypsy characters and on establishing their resistance to injustice as well as the prejudice meted out to them. It engages with cultural diversity, prejudice and conflict but ultimately privileges a liberal optimism in the resolution to the plot and reiterates racist stereotypes of Romany people.

The minor role of the elderly nurse Buda seems entirely suitable to Terry's abilities at this time. As Buda, Terry conveys the burden of awareness of her own diminishing competence. It is when Buda falls asleep that the child Arline is abducted by Devilshoof, leader of the gypsies, played by C. Aubrey Smith. Devilshoof has stealthily entered the upstairs room and charmed Arline with the promise of a visit to the gypsy camp. He thereby secures the child's silent complicity in the abduction. Other scenes, such as when the abducted child, who becomes 'the Bohemian girl', is endangered by a bear in the forest, are designed to elicit sensational thrill. It would have resonance with audiences used to early film 'serial-queen melodramas' which often incorporated the term 'girl' in their titles and featured plots concerning 'contradictory extremes of female prowess and distress, empowerment and imperilment' (Singer, 2001: 222).

Terry imbues the role of Buda with her earnest expression of emotional intensity, conveying mood and reaction as she interacts with the other performers. She appears self-consciously to position herself with furrowed brow and mournful gaze for the close-ups (Figure 31). These gestures would have been informed by her experience of posing for photographs or portraits and performing in melodrama at the Lyceum Theatre. The role of Buda exploits associations with a suffering femininity and a discourse of service which was particularly meaningful for Terry.²⁴ In her film roles later in life, Terry performed archetypal older women – the widow, the grieving mother, the nurse – who were reminiscent of her earlier stage roles in such plays as *The Good Hope* (1903), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1902) and *Alice-Sit-By-The-Fire* (1905). The casting of Terry in these sorts of roles played on the familiar, generating a meta-theatrical significance in connection with her former roles.

31 Ellen Terry in costume as Buda (seated), surrounded by cast in costume on the set of *The Bohemian Girl*, 1922. From left: Constance Collier as the Gypsy Queen; Henry Vibart as Count Arnheim; Harley Knoles, the film's co-director; Gladys Cooper as Arlene Arnheim; C. Aubrey Smith as Devilshoof; and Ivor Novello as Thaddeus.

Buda conveys the reassuringly familiar aspects of loyalty and commitment but also an increasing unreliability. She is of questionable competence in her childcare role. Numerous scenes focus on her tiredness. She appears physically incapable of keeping up with the energetic Arline. Buda's vulnerability therefore means she is easily duped by Devilshoof, the 'king of the gypsies'. In this respect, Buda functions as a device to facilitate the plot, which exploits racist anxieties about the Romany community as a mobile and predatory force.²⁵ As Jodie Matthews has established, the cultural stereotype of gypsies and 'the preponderance of abduction narratives demonstrates a latent cultural anxiety about this coherence [of the family] and the associated ideological impact on the power relations organised around race, class and gender' (Matthews, 2010: 144). These fears are also at work in the awkwardness conveyed by Ivor Novello as Thaddeus in response to Arline's developing romantic

feelings for him. As the romance is initiated by the innocent young woman, it is presented as somehow elevated from any suspicions of abuse, but the differences between Thaddeus and Arline in age and cultural background are emphasised. Thaddeus is the Polish exile disguised as a gypsy and hiding in Bohemia. He is shown in conflict: concerned to preserve his anonymity and aware of his duties as unofficial guardian of the abducted child. His reticence is also presented as evidence of his advanced education (emphasised in the film's text cards) and sets him apart from the Romany community. In the post-war period, fears about change and risk were topical. In this film they highlight the new dangers facing children and the family and the phenomena of migration and exile. These prejudices and fears are to a certain extent questioned by Ivor Novello's character, as an unjustly treated Polish refugee protected by the Romany community, which is shown to be generally mistrusted and falsely accused.

When Terry appeared in this film, her co-stars Gladys Cooper and Constance Collier already had significant stage profiles and Ivor Novello was a rising star.²⁶ It is striking that Terry is the only protagonist to appear in the film without being announced first by a descriptive storyboard. The audience was expected to be already familiar with the great actress. The film was a great success in America. Kenton Bamford locates *The Bohemian Girl* not just at a significant moment in Novello's career but also in the development of D. W. Griffith's film company:

Ivor Novello in *The Call of the Blood* (1920) 'his first professional acting assignment of any kind' and 'With Harley Knoles directing, Novello made *Carnival* (1921) and *The Bohemian Girl* (1922)'. American reviews of *The Bohemian Girl* were ecstatic; the *New York Evening Mail* assured its readers that 'Ivor Novello gives every indication of becoming another Valentino'; he was described as 'a Greek God who is both handsome and an intelligent actor', and his performance was admired for its 'admirable dignity and restraint'. Novello was contracted to D. W. Griffith at the time and with Griffith's company maximizing the attention being paid him, *The Bohemian Girl* became one of the most popular foreign movies shown in America. (Bamford, 1999: 57–8)

Novello's style of acting was similar to that of Terry's performance in the film. It also drew on the conventions of melodrama and historical drama. The incidents of villainous acts, child abduction and family reunion in the film typify the conventions of Hollywood melodrama for 'strong pathos' and 'heightened emotionality' (Singer, 2001: 290). Devilshoof, in particular, uses melodramatic, villainous gestures, stance and facial

expressions to convey thoughtful contemplation, determination and the potential for violence. These performance features are consistent with melodrama and visually reinforce the familiar racist stereotypes.

Bamford's comparison between the 'pictorial sense' of Hepworth and the work of the Pre-Raphaelites (Bamford, 1999: 114) is relevant for *The Bohemian Girl* too. In Harley Knoles's *The Bohemian Girl*, Ellen Terry provides a direct link not only to the Pre-Raphaelites, with acting memories of Edward Burne-Jones's design for *King Arthur* (1895), but also to the theatrical cultural capital of Henry Irving's Lyceum Theatre. Terry lends a unique blend of gravitas, enhancing the pictorial splendour of the setting in Leeds Castle. In the early scenes of the film she is on the battlements of the castle, keeping a supervisory eye on Arline, her young charge, who is playing dangerously near the edge of the moat. It seems clear that this is the film to which Terry referred in a letter to a friend: 'I am "doing a Film" nearby at Leeds Castle a lovely little Castle with a Moat around it & I drive over each day from here & back again in the evening ='.²⁷ Novello's deployment in his performances of sensitivity and emotionally intense physicality engendered a powerfully unstable force.²⁸

Bamford notes that 'in the battle for screen time the British film industry employed a nationalist offensive, pitting itself, its values and its product against the invasion of foreign films and the values displayed in those films' (Bamford, 1999: xi). Films by Hepworth and Knoles typically exploited the geographical location, architectural features and generally visually appealing features of the setting. These spatial forms were exploited in a particular ideological formulation aligned with Englishness, similar to the reinforcement of the hegemonic effects in period drama and aspects of the heritage industry later in the century.²⁹ Bamford quotes Hepworth's strategic approach:

'It was always in the back of my mind from the very beginning that I was to make English pictures, with all the English countryside for background and with English atmosphere and English idiom throughout.' If the cinema was sometimes known as the theatre of dreams, then Hepworth must be seen as one of the principal purveyors of a dream of English which was 'essentially rural and essentially unchanging'. (Bamford, 1999: 11)

Simon Rowson, the owner of the company that produced *The Bohemian Girl*, emphasised the political implications of film production and the significance of geographical setting for the promotion of Englishness:

Producers should be urged to specialise in the production of films which have specially English settings. Too many of our films are produced in a neutral background in which there is little that is specifically English except the language in which the actors express themselves. Why has no one yet produced an important British film set in our ship-building yards, or the Sheffield steel trade, or the British agricultural industry, or indirectly demonstrating our police and judicial and municipal systems, or our school and university systems? All these have yielded backgrounds for many worthy stage productions in the past and can be equally well utilised for film purposes. (Rowson, 1933)³⁰

The Leeds Castle location of *The Bohemian Girl* reinforced a sense of Englishness even though the story was supposed to be set in Eastern Europe. Given Rowson's commitment to promoting the English landscape on screen, this recognisably English setting seems to have been a strategic choice rather than an expedient measure.

Terry's appearance in film occurred at a time when the film industry was still developing and yet, in Britain, was vulnerable because of the influx of films from America. A move into film acting was generally considered to be a dubious choice for an actor; as Matheson Lang noted, it was 'considered a little "infra dig" for a leading actor to play in a film and I had been one of the first actor managers to do so' (quoted in Bamford, 1999: 55). Terry's image was associated with enduring youthfulness and vitality (Bloodworth, 2011). *The Bohemian Girl* benefited from the prestigious Terry brand, the commercial potential of her co-stars Cooper, Collier and Novello, as well as the attractive heritage setting in an English castle. The film achieved success in America as well as Britain. It had the ingredients to appeal to the developing capitalist cultures of both nations, and the inclusion of Ellen Terry provided a nostalgic reference point to nineteenth-century transatlantic cultural exchanges during the heyday of the Lyceum Theatre's tours of America and Canada.

Ellen Terry: inspirations for film

Ellen Terry became an inspiration and a role model when film critics looked back to successful stage performance in order to calibrate present-day film performance. It was in this context that Terry arguably provided the gold standard: thus according to Kenton Bamford, 'Joan Morgan – daughter of the director Sidney Morgan – was praised as an "embryonic Ellen Terry"' (Bamford, 1999: 45). Morgan had appeared with Terry in *Her Greatest Performance*. A general concern about

standards of film acting features in the controversy regarding the female performers' failure to use facial expression to convey emotion. This was perceived by St John Ervine as a 'craze' of the younger generation, in contrast to 'the vivacity of Ellen Terry and Marie Tempest' (Ervine, quoted in Gledhill, 2003: 66).³¹ Terry was an inspiration for individuals in the film industry, and years after her death she was to feature as a character in a Disney film. Her childhood association with Charles Dodgson captured the imagination of Aldous Huxley, whose mother, Julia Arnold, was one of the children photographed by Dodgson. Terry features in Huxley's film script as a character trusted by Dodgson with a draft of *Alice in Wonderland*. In conversation with Alice, Terry acts protectively by warning Alice about Dodgson's 'secret':

[She] describes Mr. Carroll's peculiarities. Ellen laughs. 'So you know why you can never see Mr. Carroll?' she asks and, when Alice says no, she whispers something in her ear. 'You mean that Mr. Dodgson . . .?' says Alice. 'Sh-sh,' says Ellen. 'It's a great secret. If you told anyone, the queen might say, "Off with his head."' (Higdon and Lehmann, 1992: 72)

Huxley's adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* for an animated Disney film was unfortunately never realised.³²

It is widely known that Ellen Terry regretted that she had never had the opportunity to play the part of Rosalind in *As You Like It* (see Terry, 1932: 97). However, it transpires that Terry had also wanted to extend her Shakespearean performances from stage into film. In a letter to her daughter she mentions having developed an idea and wanting to try it out, confidentially, to get feedback on it:

I've an idea about the Cinema that I'll not speak of except to you which I think might be very good – & that you & I could do it together = It is concerning Shakespeare, who as he stands at present in relation to a Film is only made absurd & altogether uninteresting – my idea (!) came of something you lately said to me about your remembering the words of the trial scene M of V only the words Henry & I spoke & the dreadful inefficiency of the other players! – I long to hear if you will think my Idea (!) of no use now no prejudice, but I'll see if I can impress you in the performance of it – On trial (in a tiny way) all to myself I'm rather impressed myself !!! – but it may be nothing – & if you don't give me a little encouragement when you hear it, it certainly will be – nothing = .³³

It is likely that the idea of a film performance of scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* had emerged from a combination of Terry's recent

experiences on tour in brief recitals and scenes and her own experiences of film acting.³⁴

Ellen Terry's repertoire in stage and screen performance

In *The Bohemian Girl* Ellen Terry represented an enduring but vulnerable maternal force, signifying home and status quo. She is a largely static vehicle for an anguished emotional response to the abduction of the child. The gypsy encampment is presented as a subversive mobile force, potentially disruptive, and, for the purposes of the plot, it provides a means of protecting Thaddeus from the intransigent oppressors. The film presents opposing views and values in a post-war context and their resolution. The revelation of the noble status of Thaddeus proves that aristocratic ties are those that bind most strongly, and a return to the status quo appears inevitable rather than a genuine openness to diversity. The harnessing of such powerful and conflicting forces seems to have made it a transatlantic success and cemented Ellen Terry's reputation in film.

32 Ellen Terry as Buda with Gladys Cooper as Arlene Arnheim and Henry Vibart as Count Arnheim (seated), in costume on the set of *The Bohemian Girl*, 1922.

The post-war reconstruction era locates *The Bohemian Girl* in long-standing fears related to gypsy abduction narratives in a particularly unstable historical period when concerns about the resilience of the family and social hierarchies were well founded, given the unprecedented social changes brought about by the First World War. The casting of Terry in the pivotal role of the nurse, Buda, as failed protector of the child signalled the end of an era: hitherto reliable and stable cultural reference points were receding. In 1920 Terry and the stalwarts of wartime fundraising and recruitment efforts were brought together one last time at Vesta Tilley's retirement performance. The reference by the press to Terry's role as Juliet's nurse demonstrates the associations that her Coliseum performances had with the care of others.³⁵ Terry became a signifier for the guardianship of home and family, but her advanced age has an added poignancy. Terry's style of performance in *The Bohemian Girl* provides an additional dimension to this sense of vulnerability in her repertoire.³⁶ As Buda, Terry's tired and distracted demeanour conveys not just an inability to control the child in her care, but a sense of generally diminished capacity.

At the time of this great success in film, Ellen Terry's stage career was in decline. In 1922, with *Potter's Clay* and *The Bohemian Girl*, Terry made her final appearances on screen. Her enduring brand was exploited in the marketing of the films and she was cited as a stable reference point to a passing era of stage performance. In this sense she was a strategic draw for that sector of the audience familiar with celebrities of the stage but unacquainted with the newly developing medium of film. For those viewers who had missed Terry at the peak of her stage career, these films introduced them to her renowned skills. For someone at the end of her career and moving into this new field, she showed remarkable enthusiasm and thoughtfulness in her approach to film. She appreciated the opportunity of employment, but rather than a financially expedient swansong, Terry's film work demonstrated her enduring attention to the artistic potential of performance.

Notes

- 1 For further discussion of this photograph and Terry's financial circumstances, see Cockin (2011).
- 2 Terry understood the theatrical market and it was for this reason that she arranged to perform *Nance Oldfield* as a curtain-raiser to guarantee an audience and some ticket sales for her son's production of *Dido and Aeneas* at the

- Coronet Theatre; see *The Collected Letters of Ellen Terry* (Cockin, 2010–15) (hereafter *CLET*) 4: 1142.
- 3 David Mayer identifies the formal transition from the technology of lantern slide lectures to silent film in the use of ‘ballad melodrama’ material (Mayer, 1996: 225).
 - 4 When Sydney Grundy’s play *The New Woman* came out at the Comedy Theatre on 1 September 1894, Terry was bemused by the reaction; *CLET* 3: 583. In 1911 in the first issue of *The Freewoman*, Terry alone is named in the editorial as an example of ‘the freewoman’.
 - 5 Shaw wrote to Edith Craig an account to be read out at the Ellen Terry memorial performance on 21 July 1940 (Laurence, 1988: 568–72; transcript held at THM 384/9/10, V&A Theatre Collection) in which he quotes Terry’s view of Kendal confided to him in a letter of 31 October 1896; *CLET* 3: 756.
 - 6 The programme for *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* is annotated in what appears to be Ellen Terry’s handwriting, ‘trade rehearsal March 7 1916 at the Cinema Theatre’ [Grand Ideal Picture]; ET-D841, National Trust’s Ellen Terry and Edith Craig Archive, British Library (hereafter ETEC). Ellen Terry and her family were fascinated by film, both commercial and artistic. A large collection of programmes from the Film Society (1926–38) in ETEC demonstrates that filmgoing and visits to the New Gallery Kinema, Regent Street, London, where the Film Society screenings were shown, was a regular event for members of their household. The Film Society was founded in 1925 to screen on a Sunday afternoon films that were not commercially orientated. It influenced the film societies, festivals and activities which were later led by the British Film Institute.
 - 7 An extant photo shows Terry and Norman McKinnell in *The Pillars of Society*; NT/SMA/PH.2641, ETEC. Terry was invited to the private showing at the London Pavilion, Piccadilly Circus, London on 23 September 1922; ET-D417, ETEC. I am grateful to Joan Templeton for her comments on Terry’s role in this film.
 - 8 James Carew appeared in several films by Cecil Hepworth, ‘the leading British film producer of the time’ (Bamford, 1999: 6). Hepworth described Carew as a stalwart acting member of his film crew (Hepworth, 1951). Carew appeared mostly in supporting roles in films which, like *The Forest on the Hill*, were set on location in atmospheric places.
 - 9 Douglas Fairbanks had married Mary Pickford in 1920 and, the previous year, Fairbanks, Pickford, Charlie Chaplin and D. W. Griffith took the strategic decision to form their own company, United Artists, to control the production, quality, sale and distribution of films. Carew had annotated Terry’s envelope ‘Sale of Jewellery, Rich people. Douglas Fairbanks. Maxine Elliott. Gertrude Elliott. Laurette Taylor’; July 4 [1920]; *CLET* 6: 1880.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 7 September 1916; *CLET* 6: 1825.

- 12 *CLET* 6: 1824
- 13 Simon Rowson became managing director of Gaumont-British Picture Corporation Ltd as well as managing director of Ideal Films Ltd and Member of the Advisory Committee to the Board of Trade under the Cinematograph Films Act (1927).
- 14 To Rosey, 7 September 1916; *CLET* 6: 1825.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 The newspaper coverage of Vesta Tilley's farewell at the Coliseum on 5 June 1920 highlighted the appearance of Ellen Terry; see, for instance, *The Stage*, 27 May 1920, p. 12; *The Era*, 6 July 1921, p. 12.
- 21 Terry appeared as Beatrice in scenes from *Much Ado About Nothing* in a charity matinee for the British Red Cross at Middle Temple Hall and Gardens on 13 July 1916, and helped at the summer fair party in aid of the wounded at Kensington War Hospital Supply Depots on 21 July 1916 (letter, 11 July 1916; *CLET* 6: 1823). In the autumn of 1917 she appeared as Mistress Page with Edith Evans as Mistress Ford in scenes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* at the London Coliseum.
- 22 *CLET* 6: 1855.
- 23 The film was based on the familiar plot derived from Cervantes' *La Gitanella* (1613) and adapted for Michael William Balfe's Drury Lane opera of 1843. The opera's international success inspired burlesque adaptations in the 1860s and 1870s (Schoch, 2003). In 1936 the film was remade and substantially altered with Laurel and Hardy replacing some aspects of the character of Thaddeus.
- 24 It is reminiscent of her role as the washerwoman in *Madame Sans Gene* but also features in a playful letter to George Bernard Shaw in which she fantasises for herself a Cinderella role in serving Shaw and his new wife (14 September 1897, *CLET* 3: 851; Cockin, 2017: 35–6).
- 25 See Bardi (2007) and Matthews (2010).
- 26 Novello and Terry had already appeared together on stage in London as, respectively, Bingley and Mrs Long in Edith Craig's production of *Pride and Prejudice* at the Palace Theatre in aid of the Bedford College for Women, London on 24 March 1922 (play programme, ET-D414, ETEC).
- 27 *CLET* 6: 1945.
- 28 Novello's gypsy performance in the film invites a wider queer application of Kirstie Blair's argument for the 'gypsy' signification of lesbian desire (2004). Terry's daughter was notably compared by Vita Sackville-West with 'the old Romany matriarch' and her lesbian household designated a gypsy 'encampment' (Sackville-West, 1949: 118).
- 29 In the same period, the English rural novel positioned the countryside in a

- nostalgic light. One of these, Constance Holme's *Beautiful End* (1918), was dramatised as *The Home of Vision* and directed by Edith Craig in 1919 for the Pioneer Players theatre society, of which Ellen Terry was president.
- 30 The year of Rowson's talk saw the founding of the GPO film unit, led by John Grierson. This was renowned for its documentary film-making, exemplified by *Night Mail* (1936), which carried out the plans Rowson had outlined, in this case showing the transportation of the post by train at night. In 1930 Edith Craig directed the first play produced for the Masses' Stage & Film Guild, an organisation which controversially promoted the screening in Britain of Russian films, to the extent that it provoked a change in legislation to control Sunday-night entertainments (Cockin, 2017: 217–19). Rowson's papers presented to the Royal Empire Society and the Royal Statistical Society have become valuable sources (Hanson, 2007: 81).
- 31 Christine Gledhill quotes St John Ervine's article 'English Actresses and the Film: The Craze of Immobility' (1926).
- 32 The transcript of Huxley's 14-page synopsis, held in the Walt Disney Studio Archive, is reproduced as an appendix by Higdon and Lehrman (1992). It highlights the positioning of Terry as an object of Dodgson's desire in order to avoid what Disney referred to as a 'queer' representation of Dodgson. Disney had wanted to produce a film version of *Alice* since 1922; he was actively discussing possible approaches to the project in 1933, but it was not until 1945 that he hired Huxley to work on the script for a film involving animation and live action. In 1937 Edith Craig, Val Gielgud and Helen Terry featured in an educational film on the 'Effects of Heredity' for the Eugenics Society, whose president was Sir Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley's brother (*Gloucester Citizen*, 15 June 1937; press cutting, EC-G100, ETEC).
- 33 1921; *CLET* 6: 1900.
- 34 These Shakespearean films are unspecified, but she may be alluding to those produced with Frank Benson and Herbert Beerbohm Tree (Burrows, 2002).
- 35 'Vesta Tilley's Farewell Tears', *Daily Mail*, 7 June 1920.
- 36 Tracy C. Davis's formulation of 'durable meanings' is relevant for considering the significance of care and service, empathy and endurance in Terry's screen performances and their intelligibility for audiences as constituents of Terry's repertoire on stage and latterly also on screen (Davis, 2009: 7).

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