The Construction of Educational Value in Thanhouser Silent Film

September 6, 2004

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ABSTRACT

Artifacts from Thanhouser archives are used to demonstrate how educational value was used as a promotional and production construct during the early years of silent film. The paper situates Thanhouser's experience within the broader purview of the Progressive Reform Movement (1900-1917), which worked to connect education with moral uplift and social improvement. It also analyzes evidence of Thanhouser's ambitious efforts to become the premiere interpreter of Shakespeare for the silent screen as testament to the studio's interest in the pedagogical possibilities of cinema.

Introduction

Since its earliest history film has functioned as an educating force and the question of its educational value has continued to be an element of the medium's production and promotion. "Educational value" was a concept often used by studios and promoters to substantiate and encourage the rapid expansion of the fledgling film industry. An analysis of how silent film's educational value was constructed indicates there existed a culturally specific dichotomy in attitudes of the time toward education as an arbiter of taste. At a time when less than 3 percent of the American population graduated from college, education bore a patina of mysticism (Fass 189).[1] At the same time, university education was an emblem of socio-economic status and an indicator of the leisure class, and agrarian and working class populations often cast the higher classes who had access to education as profligate. Mysticism in combination with a suspicion of profligacy engendered a duplicitous attitude toward the educational value of education itself. Thus, when educational value was used to promote a film, it often produced caution if not outright skepticism on the part of social critics. Nonetheless, this new form of mass culture did have its appeal to pragmatists such as John Dewey who were looking for a means of cultural stimulus to motivate widespread interest in public education.

Artifacts from Thanhouser archives prior to 1917 offer examples of how educational value was negotiated during its history. This paper will situate Thanhouser's experience within the broader purview of the Progressive Reform Movement (1900-1917), which worked to connect education with moral uplift and social improvement. This paper will also present evidence of Thanhouser's ambitious efforts to become the premiere interpreter of Shakespeare for the silent screen as testament to the company's interest in the pedagogical possibilities of

[1] According to Irving Louis Horowitz and William H. Friedland in *The Knowledge Factory: Student Power and Academic Politics in America* (Chicago: Adline, 1970, p. 130) in 1900 4 percent of 18- to 20-year-olds attended college; there were about 250,000 American university students at the turn of the century.

cinema. The first section will provide a brief context for the paper's methodology and theoretical framework. The second section will cite Thanhouser documents and contextual references from the era that underscore the discursive construction of educational value during silent film's emergent years. The third section will present contemporary analyses of Thanhouser's Shakespearean adaptations, which locate its pedagogical work as preeminent among silent film companies.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery (1985) discuss methodology as being relative to questions of historical evidence precisely because forms and practices tend to be beyond the concern of film historians. They assert specific issues surrounding the theory and practice of film history are twofold. First, experimental scientists benefit from knowledge obtained from a reproduction of facts whereas film historians (and historians in general, for that matter) do not. Second, in the study of film, confounding elements come into play as the resulting research product is closely intertwined with its sociological context. In simpler terms, historical interpretation is influenced by tendencies that prove to be a reflection of the historian's age.

Traditional perspectives in the study of film history have been empiricist and conventionalist in approach, specifically, the collection and organization of film data and the reasoning of raw material by the historian into historical evidence (Allen and Gomery 14). A more recent approach, which has been termed the realist approach, lends itself to this paper. Rather than looking for a single cause leading up to an event, the realist approach is concerned with the role of generative mechanisms, in addition to mere observation, which operate in conjunction with each other to form of a layer of reality.

According to Allen and Gomery, the film history discipline (as opposed to other theoretical and critical branches) is concerned with cinema's temporal dimension; that is, how

film as an art, technology, social force, and economic institution has developed over time (5). This paper will employ the realist approach to offer a causal analysis of a generative event (sometimes coupled with its historical explanation and interrelationships with other mechanisms) as a way of describing a facet of film history. It should be noted that the force or impact of each mechanism (art, social, technological, and economic) is uneven for each observable event.

A notion inherent in the examination of first-hand and secondary historical sources is that although film has come to be regarded as an art form, that has not always been the case. Social critics of the early cinema did realize that the moving picture (art form or not) had "come to stay" due in large part to public demand (Anonymous 1912). At one point, cinema was regarded as a fundamental means of public education. Catalogues of subjects indicating films possessing educational value (such as religion, geology, and history) were compiled for use by teachers and librarians (Miller and Cruce 1999). In the second period of early cinema (1907-1914), a societal trend of consumption emerged in several industrial spheres, and cinema took on the characteristics of a product for mass, even disposable, consumption: "Even the most expensive productions (were) seen for only a single day in the ten thousand or more picture theatres" (Anonymous 1912).

As a mitigating force, a healthy strain of moralism influenced early twentieth century America as it emerged from the Victorian era. Rapid urbanization and increased immigration prompted calls for behavioral restraint. A collision of motives is revealed in the literature of film promotion during this time. An uncertain public negotiated boundaries between taste and trash, education and morality, enlightenment and exoticism that are played out in the contextual/textual aspects of early silent film promotion and production.

The Construction of Educational Value

To begin with, the primary proponents of the educational value of silent films were directors and producers. In an April newspaper interview Edwin Thanhouser described the motion picture of 1914 as "…a strong educational force." Echoing Thanhouser's assessment that same year, D. W. Griffith hailed the elucidating aspect of filmic storytelling to educate (that is, to morally uplift the masses). His discourse expresses the mystical view of education held by those of his class at the time, as evidenced in the following excerpt:

> GRIFFITH: Suppose, for instance, that you were Milton, or Browning, or any of the poets whose work has lived for generations after them. Say that you had just written *Paradise Lost* and wished to have it produced on the stage. To whom would you go? In your natural enthusiasm after the completion of a great work, to whom would you go and even expect a production? Can you imagine your reception in the average [theater] manager's office with a manuscript of a classic under your arm? Or, supposing the impossible, that you had secured a [theatrical] production, of what [theater] manager would you expect a performance that would contain any of the poetry, any of the soul of your work?
>
> WELSH: Giving due allowance for the difficulty with which I imagine that I am Browning or Milton, I confess that the prospect of peddling *Paradise Lost* along Broadway is not alluring.
>
> Mr. Griffith smiles with me as we imagine the poet's plight.
>
> "Aha," he continues, " but the motion picture has taken all of these works, has deemed none of them too 'highbrowed,' and has ' got them across.' Perhaps the production was not always perfect, or wonderfully artistic, but the big idea was still there, still intact, and it reached the hearts of the spectators. The motion

> picture is doing daily more than the stage of to-day can think of doing. Before the stage attempts to criticise the photoplay let it do one part of what the motion picture is doing for the enjoyment, uplift and education of the people. (Welsh 50)

Later in the same interview, Griffith adds:

> The future of the picture is a topic that usually makes me go into ecstasies. The big things it is possible for the picture to do make one feel at a loss for words. Just think of what it would mean as an educational force. (Welsh 53)

Later that year, Thanhouser echoed his earlier sentiment, asserting in a promotional release that "the motion picture of today is … particularly well adapted to make very real to the youth's mind the great deeds of history, to acquaint him with the best literature, to make familiar to him the various scenes, to show him graphically the wonders of nature throughout the world."[2] The context of these remarks is significant because Thanhouser was responding to widespread social criticism being directed at the film industry for its lack of morality.

One of Thanhouser's productions that year was a film called *Dope*, which "just missed the education category and landed in the vice category" for its illustration "in a legitimate way the menace of drugs."[3] The social problem identified in the film was the unregulated dispensing of opium (and its derivatives) and cocaine by physicians, druggists, and patent-medicine manufacturers that was prevalent at the time (Boyer 632). In the plot of the film, the oldest son of a wholesale druggist is addicted to alcohol so his doctor gives him an injection of morphine. The young man steals and eventually murders to satisfy his craving for more of the drug. At the same time, his sister is introduced to cocaine at a party with some of her society friends. She

[2] From Bowers, Q. David, Chapter 7: 1914: Vice and Sex, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

[3] Ibid

abandons her husband and son to become a prostitute, and later dies attempting to steal cocaine from a retail druggist.

During the Progressive Era (1889-1920) intellectuals such as Jane Addams, John Dewey, Eugene V. Debs, and Booker T. Washington challenged the ideological foundations of the free market and generated widespread political response to immigration, urban growth, corporate power, and class division (Boyer 625). Progressivism was the impetus for The Narcotics Act of 1914, which regulated heroin, morphine, cocaine and other addictive substances. The passage of this legislation coincided with the release of *Dope* and reformist fervor of the time was schismatic with regard to the educational value of film portrayals of this particular social problem. While reformers agreed better education was a solution for societal ills, the boundary between education and morality in popular culture was being negotiated. This inchoate distinction between what was pedagogical and what was moral was enacted in arguments over subjectivity in film portrayals.

In 1914, The National Board of Review (previously the New York Board of Censorship) made a regulatory distinction between "education" content and "vice" (Brownlow 4-5). The portrayal of drug addiction had to be tasteful in order to be considered of educational value. Too realistic a portrayal skirted the limits of taste; vice was a way of discerning what the middle class would identify as aesthetic trash. Critics at the time of *Dope's* release found the film brutish in its portrayal of addiction. *The New York Dramatic Mirror* (April 1, 1914) found it particularly offensive to show a mother abandoning her baby. *Dope* was also discussed at length in *The New York Dramatic Mirror* and *Variety* (which was a new publication at the time). The review in *Variety* noted, "…were it not for the unclean portions or vice sections of the film, Mr. Lieb [the film's producer and star] would have had a feature he could have made extravagant claims for."[4]

[4] From Bowers, Q. David, Chapter 7:1914: Vice and Sex, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

The story of *Dope* was taken from a 1909 Broadway play written by Joseph Medill Patterson[5]. By the time *Dope* was adapted for the screen by Thanhouser, progressivism had made its subject matter topical and highly controversial. At the time of *Dope's* release, Edwin Thanhouser was in Europe (having sold his interest in the studio) and Patterson was involved with the Mutual Film Corporation as a promoter and backer of Thanhouser's successful serial *The Million Dollar Mystery*, which was first syndicated by *The Chicago Tribune* newspaper (in which his family had an ownership interest). Patterson's involvement with cinema as a socializing force predated his authorship of *Dope.* He was politically active during the waxing years of the Progressive Reform Movement, beginning with election to the Illinois House of Representatives in 1903[6]. In 1907, he wrote an article for *The Saturday Evening Post* that celebrated the educational value of the medium and its potential for the edification of society:

> Civilization, all through the history of mankind, has been chiefly the property of the upper classes, but during the past century civilization has been permeating steadily downward. The leaders of this democratic movement have been general education, universal suffrage, cheap periodicals and cheap travel. To-day the moving-picture machine cannot be overlooked as an effective protagonist of democracy. For through it the drama, always a big fact in the lives of the people at the top, is now becoming a big fact in the lives of the people at the bottom. Two million of them a day have so found a new interest in life. (10-11)

Patterson's viewpoint was representative of an emergent sensibility about popular culture and educational practice. William James' book *Pragmatism* was published that

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[5]From Bowers, Q. David, Filmography: April 1, 1914, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

[6]From Bowers, Q. David, Biographies: Patterson, J. Medill – Advisor, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

same year. In his work, James expressed discontent with arbitrary boundaries between disciplines. By the time Thanhouser began releasing films in 1910, the aesthetic/exotic properties of cinema offered evidence of James' pragmatic claims about the socially enlightening aspects of illuminative experience. From the beginning this enlightened perspective informed the studio's promotional efforts. Edwin Thanhouser insisted "There should be the freest kind of access to this educational force"[7] and he argued vociferously against regulation, insisting that "good motion picture plays should be placed within the reach of children just the same as good books."[8]

Certainly Edwin Thanhouser's passion was in keeping with the tenets of progressivism. However, the transcendent quality of film as an educational force was also a notion that was commonly and flamboyantly exploited in industry promotional efforts. It was widely trumpeted that exposure to this new technology offered enlightenment of the kind previously available to only those of breeding and pedigreed learning (see Bowser 199). Press agentry of the time captures the sublime and the ridiculous range of emotions expressed about the educational value of early cinema. On the one hand, the medium was promoted as artful and elevating entertainment, as propounded in this excerpt from "Confessions of a Motion Picture Press Agent:"

> It occurred to me that such a Grecian nymph had best be represented in the advertising "copy" by reproductions of Aphrodite rising from the sea or disporting Eros and Psyche. When, however, I showed the Phidias and Praxiteles reproductions to the head of the company, he yelled: "Trash! Trash! Don't you know any better than to bring me junk like that?" 'Twas evident the

[7]From Bowers, Q. David. Chapter 4: 1911: Edwin Thanhouser on Censorship, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

[8] Ibid

> proprietor's classical education had been neglected. Per contra, his ideals of female loveliness were founded on the Irish-American and Teutonic "Egyptian dancers" at Coney Island. Consequently all our advertising campaign centered around the heroine as an Egyptian princess to whom the *danse du ventre* was no mystery. (Confessions 398)

The same press agent (later in the same article) reveals a certain skepticism underlying middle class consumerism when he indicates that educational value would have to fend for itself in the marketplace of ideas:

> Why don't the manufacturers make useful pictures? Simply because they're purveyors of commercialized amusement, no more called upon to produce educationals than fiction publishers are to issue textbooks. The impulse toward useful pictures must come from the outside. Educators must be won over to the cause of cinema instruction, and the eyes of philanthropists opened to the fact that film universities are exactly as important as book libraries or college professorships. (Confessions 407)

The harried approach of press agentry to the pedagogical importance of the popular cinema indicates the challenge faced when marketing this unfamiliar medium in its turbulent infancy. Appealing to the emerging middle class was tricky business. Middle class skepticism about anything newfangled was an outgrowth of Protestantism and its pervasive influence in social criticism at the turn of the century. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were a time of massive change in American Protestantism. Prior to this period, "Protestantism presented an almost unbroken front in its defense of the social status quo" (May 1980: 91).

From around 1880 onwards, however, social changes began to undermine the hegemonic influence Protestant denominations had previously enjoyed:

> The Civil War had called nationhood into question. Immigrants, many of whom were not Protestant, were coming in droves. Factories were being built, and millions were moving out of rural settings into cities. America was becoming a world power. Public schools were distributing the products of the Enlightenment to more and more people, as evolution and textual analysis became part of everyday intellectual baggage, and higher education grew increasingly secular. Labor was organizing, and the vicissitudes of a capitalist economy were becoming evermore apparent. (282)

The formative orientation of Protestantism and its pragmatic grasp of secularism underpinned, for example, D. W. Griffith's middle class belief that the cinema was "a moral and educational force" and "the universal language" predicted in the Bible. Like a revivalist preacher, he asserted a skilled director "might provide an experience that could convert the soul from evil to good" (May 1983: 72-73). Here, the fervor of innovation collided with an amorphous and largely uneducated mass audience.

Around 1912, reformers made a concerted effort to "uplift" the cinema (Gomery 34-41). Theater owners made (or were forced to make) their theaters safer and more sanitary, local censorship boards insured that films did not offend middle class tastes, and theater seats and decorations became more pretentious. The venue that succeeded the nickel parlor targeted a different audience than the nickelodeons as middle class patrons began to attend the movies in droves. Disciplined armies of uniformed ushers enforced audience behavior and decorum. The theaters' large size often kept prices low. However, at least during the day, many working class patrons may still have attended.

The resulting shift in audience patterns was instigated, at least in part, by social reformism. Producers of films after 1912 responded to the urban climate of the time by

channeling a desire for social change into their productions (Sloan 125). The appeal of filmed entertainment "grew out of a disappointment with the promise that America seemed to offer the immigrants" (125). It was Protestantism, with its emphasis on personal redemption and stewardship, which offered an ideal cinematic formula to cope with the dilemmas of capitalism and its discontents (126). Through widely recognized and accessible forms such as melodrama "the ideological problems of the era were transformed into fairy tales," and melodramas made by reformers "typically presented their solutions as a way of soothing the nation's ills" (126).

As a promoter and producer, Edwin Thanhouser embraced the melodramatic form. In promotional material about his films he often referred to his ambition to ensure the studio's legacy as a provider of educational value. This legacy was framed within stories about alienation and assimilation that expressed the company's ambition to capture representations of what behavior was seen as heroic or villainous, and what sorts of scenes were considered visually beautiful, hilarious, or endearing to diverse audiences at the turn of the century.

In the 1916 Thanhouser release *Betrayed,* the daughter of a Winnebago (Indian) chief "quits the Western reservation for the Eastern metropolis"[9] where she falls in love with a wealthy Anglo-American college student. The resolution of "one of the prettiest love stories imaginable" (*The Moving Picture World,* 5 Feb. 1916) is that she commits suicide after her brother vows to kill her lover in a fit of revenge over their affair. In its synopsis of the film, *Reel Life* (15 Jan. 1916) comments on the veracity of the screenplay, noting "It is true that many of the Indians…are making desperate efforts to save the remnants of their people by securing an education in government colleges." The synopsis goes on to observe "…the Indian hopes to preserve himself by getting an education which shall make him the equal of white man – but in most instances all his knowledge ever brings him is melancholy."

[9] From Bowers, Q. David, Filmography: *Betrayed, Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

Melodrama capitalized on the fears and anxieties of viewers concerned with whether they and their children would always be outsiders in the New World. What is suggested in the narrative of *Betrayed* is that educational reform may hold promise for industrialized society, but its transformative powers leave something behind. The first generations of immigrants, particularly those who were not from Western European countries, found assimilation painful. Giving up tradition and abandoning familiar ways of being engendered feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty. Emotionally charged representations of their dilemma offered working class audiences a cathartic experience that did not require reading or language skills.

Proletarian concerns were also appeased by Thanhouser's production of escapist films such as *The Jewels of Allah* (1911), *The East and the West* (1911), *The Buddhist Priestess* (1911), *Into The Desert* (1912), *The Arab's Bride* (1912), *The Birth of the Lotus Blossom* (1912), *The Cat's Paw* (1914), *The Miser's Reversion* (1914), and *The Desert Tribesman* (1914). These films appealed to plebeian fantasies by offering a reproduction of turn-of-the-century industrialized class relations. In these melodramas, wealth and power are located within the confines of a puissant family unit, and a patriarchal figure dictates who shall live and die and who shall marry whom. In the end, the redemptive ambitions of Protestantism triumph over the autocratic scion and the protagonists decamp to freedom conveying fortune and romance. More than hedonistic escapism, the exotic element in these stories is a wage-less, labor-less venue where overseers analogous to the Astors, the Rockefellers, the Carnegies, and the Morgans are fantastically outmaneuvered.

By the time World War I erupted in 1914 movie audiences had undergone several transformations: from predominately middle class audiences at vaudeville house projections to largely working class audiences at the beginning of the nickelodeon period to a new middle class audience gradually enlisted as movie theaters became more luxurious. This change in exhibition

also helps explain a dichotomous approach to the perceived educational value in film content. For the middle class, education offered the possibility of upward mobility and a better life. A better life meant reward for morality and righteousness. For the working class, the educated were still elite, a distant and powerful entity, able to indulge in the excesses that money could buy. Certainly both of these distinct audiences responded differently to pragmatic notions about film as a stimulus for education.

Shakespearean Ambitions

After the war, a group of German scientists and intellectuals who had mixed feelings about the entire process of modernization began to assail the value of films as an educational force (Fredericksen 316). Among this group was a psycho-physiologist and forensic psychologist named Hugo Munsterberg (1863-1916). His article "Peril to Childhood in the Movies" was published in the February 1917 edition of *Mother's Magazine* and it expressed concern over the dangers of film to young audiences. Munsterberg painted a grim picture: "It would be reckless indeed to ignore the dangers that lurk in the gaudy cinematograph shows," he writes, specifically "an atmosphere of vulgarity and triviality" (Griffith 117-118).

Edwin Thanhouser voiced his opinion on the matter during an interview for *The Exhibitor's Trade Review*[10] later that year. Based on letters he had received from librarians around the United States, he asserted that adapting books for the screen stimulates reading. The previous year, Thanhouser had sent letters of inquiry to the heads of libraries throughout the country. He then documented the responses in a compilation he released for publication in their professional journal for their review. Thanhouser stated he could not understand why the visualization of a story would be harmful in any way, and the testimony of librarians supported his belief. In their experience, films were a form of advertising and stimulated interest in books:

[10] From Bowers, Q. David, Chapter 10:1917:Trouble With Pathe, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

after seeing filmic versions of novels, patrons were motivated to read the sources of the adaptations.

The endorsement of librarians was noble praise in the United States of the early 1900s (Boyer 18). Their benefaction was due not only to Edwin Thanhouser's astute understanding of the medium; it was prompted by his dedication to quality productions of the plays of William Shakespeare.[11] Protestantism of the time embraced Shakespeare's work as the pinnacle of literary achievement (Herx 1349) and Thanhouser understood the implications of this cultural imperative. His experience in the theater stood him in good stead, and Thanhouser's production ethos continues to be celebrated by contemporary scholars of Shakespearean cinema who characterize Thanhouser's adaptations as unrivaled in the silent film era.

The studio adapted four plays by the Bard of Stratford-upon-Avon: *Romeo and Juliet* (1911), *The Tempest* (1911), *Cymbeline* (1913), and *King Lear* (1916). According to scholar Robert Hamilton Ball, *The Tempest* "…may have been one of his less successful productions. We can never be sure because most of Thanhouser's films were destroyed in a 1917 warehouse conflagration" (70). Nonetheless, "The director, Edwin Thanhouser, made exceptional contributions to the early films on Shakespeare" (228). Kenneth S. Rothwell agrees, "Thanhouser's great achievement … was in becoming the supreme auteur of the silent Shakespeare film in America" (51).

Rothwell describes *Romeo and Juliet* as "One of a distinguished group of silent films produced by Edwin and Gertrude Thanhouser, who were genuine lovers of Shakespeare and sought to bring a higher standard to the production of Shakespeare on screen than previously had been the case" (247). Ball agrees, "Although only a fragment of the original film, this production obviously had many features of artistic merit for its time. The exterior shots are well

[11] From Bowers, Q. David, Chapter 9: 1917: Edwin Thanhouser, *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History.*

lit and manage to convey richness and opulence, while the interior shots feature genuine paneling, not painted flats. Titles seem to have been held to a minimum. The film begins, however, virtually *in media res* with this title: "Romeo breaks edict against dueling" (72-73).

Cymbeline is "…one of the best of the early Shakespeare silents" according to Rothwell (51). In his analysis of Thanhouser's work, Ball notes, "He managed to use his theatrical flair to make effective cinema, especially in his talent for arranging actors in an effective mise en scene. He also relished more cinematically based exterior action shots, where, like D.W. Griffith in *Birth of a Nation*, he favored thundering troops of mounted cavalry. And the sharp, even lighting he managed to achieve with his primitive equipment is also notable. Positioned as Thanhouser was in history, he made a serious effort to bring middle class culture to the masses without denigrating his source material" (151-155).

Ball is equally enthusiastic about *King Lear*: "…freed from the 'unworthy scaffold' and 'wooden O,' the film boasts a great battle scene, which was shot in and around the environs of a 'castle' located in New Rochelle, New York. For that time, when heavy equipment made cameras immobile, the results are impressive. A series of reaction shots depict a gloating Goneril and Regan ecstatic over the carnage spread out before them; dozens of extras outfitted in costume armor carry out a rousing cavalry charge while foot soldiers hack away with menacing looking swords or hurl boulders on the helpless wounded. Intercut are reaction shots of an angelic and anguished Cordelia. And even as the film attempts to sever the ancient bond with the theatre, the veteran actor, [Frederick B.] Warde, as did the more celebrated [Sir Johnston] Forbes-Robertson in his *Hamlet*, offers a documentary of how a nineteenth-century actor approached a major Shakespearean role" (130-131).

Rothwell notes Edwin Thanhouser produced extratextual interpretations of Shakespeare as well, an unusual and innovative offering for its time. He writes of *Master Shakespeare*,

Strolling Player (1916): “This film was a part of the tercentenary commemoration of Shakespeare’s death. In this documentary/biography he [Thanhouser] paid special attention to the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy. People never seem to tire of contemplating the possibility that Shakespeare was not Shakespeare but somebody else” (317-318). As Rothwell suggests, extratextual knowledge of Shakespeare, no matter how cursory, was (and perhaps still is) indexical of educated knowledge and holds value in conversational currency.

Conclusion

The edifying effects of the cinema are still being debated a century after its inception. The investigation of this paper into the construction of educational value during the Progressive Era offers a glimpse into the collective psyche of filmgoers at the turn of the century. Thanhouser Films ceased production in 1917, but during its tenure, its ambitious output captured the turbulent social discourse of a nation emerging from social division and civil war while grappling with phenomenal growth and industrialization. Thanhouser’s archives contribute to a deeper understanding of how educational value functioned as a construct of early silent film promotion and production, and how the studio’s dedication to quality production induced a higher standard for the pedagogical possibilities of film as a popular cultural form.

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