

Tess of the Storm Country

By Eileen Whitfield

Excerpt from "Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood," published by University Press of Kentucky, 1997. Reprinted by permission of the author.

Mary Pickford was hardly the only actor in the 1910s to inspire a following. In popularity polls she ranked sometimes above, sometimes below such passing fancies as Clara Kimball Young, Earl Williams and J. Warren Kerrigan. But only Pickford inspired a peculiar intensity that made her "the intimate possession of all the people." And Mary was forever set apart from other actors as the first pop icon who took shape through moving images. The romantic shock with which she entered viewers' hearts hung about her for decades.

"Tess of the Storm Country" (1914) brought this delirium to fever pitch. This, the fifth Pickford feature and one of the earliest to survive, was also the first in a year-long contract with Famous Players. Fittingly, it showered her with laurels right from the opening credits: "Daniel Frohman Presents America's Foremost Film Actress, Mary Pickford, in the famous tale of a woman's heroism, 'Tess of the Storm Country' by Grace Miller White. Miss Mary Pickford as Tessibel Skinner." At which point the Foremost Film Actress, wearing a delicate, frothy dress, steps through a curtain with an armload of roses. She carries them to a nearby vase, arranges them, and breathes in their fragrance. Now, she looks into the lens—the equivalent, in this context, of a stage bow—and buries her face in the bouquet again.

Enter Tess, an "expressive-eyed tatterdemalion" living in a shantytown of squatters who fish illegally. She spends her time striding round the beach, tossing a fabulous head of curls, and getting into fist-fights with a lecherous neighbor. The role would be red meat for any player, but it's ideal for Pickford, as it fuses the comic spitfires of her Biographs with the ragged, naive castaway Nina from the feature "Hearts Adrift" (1913). In the course of a fairly com-



An advertisement for "Tess of the Storm Country" from "Motion Picture World," March 28, 1914. From the Library of Congress collection as made available through the Media History Digital Library. <http://mediahistoryproject.org/>

plex plot, Tess takes a baby from a suicidal unwed mother named Teola and cares for it as her own. This is at some personal cost, as Tess's suitor, Frederick, is Teola's brother. Unaware that Tess did not bear the child, he drops her after ripping up her Bible. Tess must steal to feed the baby—in fact, she must steal from Teola's rich family. When Teola's father catches her, he whips Tess savagely, with Frederick and Teola looking on. Then Pickford asks, with considerable dignity: "has been beaten – now air I to have the milk?" (In a nice irony, she spills it.) Later, when the baby grows ill, Tess observes: "That brat air dyin'." She attends a church service with the baby, asking that it be baptized, but the priest refuses. Tess is astonished: "Be ye agoin' to let him go to a place where God can't find him?" She baptizes the child herself while the congregation murmurs. Finally, Teola, who is watching from a pew, cries out, "He is my baby!" Tess, with mixed relief and scorn, gives the baby to Teola, and walks out, back straight, but lowering her head in sorrow.

The movie cannot live up to this performance. There are some stirring storm effects. The village of squatters is picturesque. But Edwin S. Porter, in Pickford's view, was less a born director than a born mechanic. She complained that he failed to show "the slightest in acting or the dramatic aspects of motion pictures." Indeed, Porter violates the simplest film grammar. The actors rush stagily through their scenes while the camera watches from a static position. Yet Pick-

ford's bossy, witty Tess survives through sheer force of temperament and talent. Julian Johnston of *Photoplay* later described Pickford's onscreen persona as "luminous tenderness in a steel band of gutter ferocity." She unleashes those qualities in *Tess* and sweeps the movie up in what a fan called her 'weird magnetic grip.' Along the way, she created a landmark: the first great star performance in American features.

Riding the wave of her triumph in "Tess," the actress's profile rose higher still. She was commonly believed to be "the best known woman who has ever lived, the woman who was known to more people and loved by more people than any other woman has been in all history." The statement, made in the 1980s by Pickford's contemporary, journalist Adela Rogers St. Johns, is impossible to prove. But in Pickford's day it was accepted as gospel, and even today it is seldom challenged. And if silent film, as Hollywood claimed, was the universal language, a medium that would teach love among nations, bring cultures together, and eradicate war, then Mary, as its supreme representative, embodied a new world understanding.

"Calling Mary 'America's Sweetheart' was not exactly a stroke of genius. I was simply putting down in two words what everybody in America seemed to be feeling about her." B.P. Schulberg wrote both publicity and scenarios for Famous Players; in fact, he wrote the scenario for *Tess*. "I was standing in front of a theater one day watching people buy tickets to see Mary in one of the early movies I wrote for her when

a middle-aged couple stopped in front of a display of stills from the picture. 'There she is,' the husband said. 'My little sweetheart.' ... 'She's not just your little sweetheart, she's everybody's sweetheart,' his wife said. It rang a bell." Thus the phrase "America's Sweetheart" was put into ad copy pushing Mary's pictures.

Pickford insisted that the phrase was given to her by the San Francisco exhibitor D.J. "Pop" Grauman. But Schulberg's point—that Pickford's image was created by the public, and augmented by publicity—is crucial. The cult of America's Sweetheart was unique in its intensity, innocence and fervor. "People ... consider me their personal friend," Pickford told a journalist. "They follow my every step, and they get to the point where they not only want me to be, but expect me to be, in real life exactly what I am in the pictures." One true believer was William Bartels, a homeless fan who attracted a crowd as he built a shrine to Pickford in a New York park. Who was his sweetheart? Mary Pickford, he told the arresting officer—though, he admitted, he "was not yet on speaking terms with her."

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Eileen Whitfield began her career as an actress on Canadian stages and television. She became a journalist in 1980, and worked as an editor and writer at Toronto Life and Saturday Night magazines. She has also written on cultural subjects for Canada's national newspapers The Globe and Mail and The National Post. Her play, "Alice and Emily," was performed at the Citadel Theatre, in 1993. An independent scholar of silent film, she is the author of the biography Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood and a contributor to Mary Pickford: Queen of the Movies.