

“A Happy Medium: Women’s Suffrage Portrayals in Thanhouser Films, 1910-16”  
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In the early twentieth century, advances in and nationwide awareness of the women’s suffrage movement coincided with the budding growth and popularity in motion pictures. Unquestionably the two exploited each other’s progress. For the suffrage movement, cinema provided national publicity, both good and bad, and for many Americans it was their only exposure to the reform movement and its participants. Moreover, the cinema also served as a battleground and arena of public debate for the votes-for-women movement. No one is certain how many silent-era films depicted the suffrage movement or portrayed female suffragists. Unfortunately, like the majority of silent-film stock, they are lost to history. In film studies, few scholars have examined the relationship between cinema and the suffrage movement.<sup>1</sup> The investigations which have delved into this connection yield surprising and fascinating results. As film historian Kay Sloan argues, silent movies relating to the suffrage debate, produced both by the industry and suffragists themselves, provide historical insight and expose specific issues concerning sexual politics that are still deliberated today.<sup>2</sup>

The work that has been completed by scholars reveals the relatively lack of neutral ground in the portrayal of suffragism in silent-era cinema. Its delineation presents

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<sup>1</sup> See: Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies, and the American Dream* (New York: Avon, 1973); Gretchen Bataille, “Preliminary Investigations: Early Suffrage Films,” *Women and Film*, I (1973), 42-44; Martin F. Norden, “A Good Travesty Upon the Suffrage Movement,” *Women’s Suffrage Films as Genre*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 13:4 (1986), 171-177; Kay Sloan, “Sexual Warfare in the Silent Cinema: Comedies and Melodramas of Woman Suffragism,” *American Quarterly*, 33:4 (Autumn, 1981), 412-436 & *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 99-124; Shelly Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Moving Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Virginia Wexman, “Suffering and Suffrage: Birth, the Female Body, and Women’s Choices in D.W. Griffith’s *Way Down East*,” *The Velvet Light Trap*, 29 (1992), 53-66.

<sup>2</sup> Sloan, “Sexual Warfare in the Silent Cinema,” 413.

two extremes: cynical, industry produced illustrations or angelic, suffrage-produced depictions. Scholars have analyzed dozens of industry produced silent-era suffrage films and concluded they relied on negative stereotypes of suffragists—these women possessed masculine features, created chaos and disorder when out publicly, neglected their children and family, oppressed their husbands, and terrorized their community. Indeed, typecasting characters in silent-era cinema served two primary purposes: for one, it provided predictability which helped standardize filmmaking allowing for more efficient production and ultimately monetary gains, and two, it allowed for greater narrative development and easily identifiable characters for audiences to follow. Indeed, to counteract such negative depictions, two leading national women's rights groups, the National American Women Suffrage Association and the Women's Political Union, produced four films from 1912-1914 for the purpose of advancing their cause and undermining the unfair, negative propaganda promoted against them. Film scholar Shelly Stamp praises these groups as the earliest advocacy bodies to utilize cinema when its powers of presenting social commentary were not fully realized or respected. Although the films may have been successful in attracting followers, they probably achieved little in the way of combating unfair depictions of suffragists due to the volume of debasing productions they were up against.

The Thanhouser Company produced over 15 films in which the votes-for-women's movement was featured or a suffragist played a leading role. This paper will argue that Thanhouser productions acted as a mediator between the two polemical representations generally provided in the history of cinema and suffragism, thus

providing varied American audiences ambiguous and sometimes confusing depictions of suffragists. Through added verisimilitude, vague plots, and the use of foreign stereotypes, Thanhouser's suffrage films were appealing to both men and women, pro and anti-suffrage. None of these films survive for viewing, however, handicapping the ability to critique their visual descriptions. This examination will use movie reviews from trade journals and newspapers to investigate the association between suffragism and Thanhouser productions. Indeed, there are drawbacks to using such sources since the reviewers and critics do not overtly reveal their sentiments over the debate, therefore sometimes hiding prejudices and biases in their reviews and sometimes allowing them to get in the way. Nonetheless, the debate over suffrage spilled over into the pages of these publications, providing valuable testimony and review over women's rights, suffragist portrayals, and images depicted in the industry. They stand today as a useful asset to the nexus between suffrage and cinema history.

Production of suffrage films peaked between the years 1908-1914, nearly a decade before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. These years were formidable in the progress of the movement as five states during this time granted voting rights to women and Congress debated the possibility of women's enfranchisement for the first time. Exactly how much motion pictures directly supported this is unknown. What can be deduced, however, is that, as film scholars have concluded, suffrage films worked psychologically to reveal sentiments at an unconscious level. For those sympathetic to the cause, the films became "a part of their imaginative landscape—or collective dreamworld" integral to their enacted identities and motivation.<sup>3</sup> For those opposed to the

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<sup>3</sup> See Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 186-187.

movement, silent suffrage films created a “nightmarish world of psychic fears.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the suffrage movement was much more than about women’s right to vote, it was also about challenging Victorian traditions and ideology of “proper” place, modernizing, and occupying a new place in the public domain.

Sloan has meticulously analyzed what remains of silent-era films depicting the suffragist cause and outlined many themes running through industry produced films. The movement was shown in newsreels, melodramas and comedies, the latter genre being the most popular. Newsreel companies, particularly Pathe’ and Gaumont, sought dramatic moments when filming actual suffrage events, sensationalizing suffragists as violent, hysterical, and terrorizing. Obviously moving away from the mantra of informing their audience, newsreel filmmakers wished to entertain their audiences through the suffrage movement. For example, Pathe’ showed audiences a great fire in England apparently set by suffragists and Gaumont captured a suffragist martyr throwing herself in front of a galloping horse during the 1913 British Derby and getting trampled.<sup>5</sup> Although these films obviously possessed negative implications for the suffragists, they did provide exposure and thrust the movement into the arena of public debate, as newsreels were a daily feature in nickelodeon programs.

Melodrama and comedies tended to mock suffragists as well. Sloan finds three broad themes operating in anti-suffrage comedies before WWI: rebellious women whose forays into public arena were unsuccessful and they found themselves scurrying to the safe confines of the home, androgynous suffragists who disrupted the romances of their

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<sup>4</sup> Sloan, “Sexual Warfare in Silent Cinema,” 422; Stamp, *Movie-struck Girls*, 169.

<sup>5</sup> Sloan, “Sexual Warfare in Silent Cinema,” 415-416.

prettier companions, and inverted sex roles where women battered their husbands.<sup>6</sup> Melodrama highlighted imaginary misfortunes and tragedy associated with suffragism, especially within the home, depicting neglected children and husbands, indeed a plea to suffragists to assume their “rightful” position in the traditional social order. The anti-suffrage comedies and melodramas underscored male anxieties and tensions associated with the movement and their concerns for the future and the status quo of power relations in society.<sup>7</sup>

Thanhouser’s first film portraying suffragists mimicked industrial trends. The comedy *Looking Forward* (1910) centers around Jack Goodwin, a chemistry student who discovers a liquid compound which allows people to fall asleep for a determinate period of time without the pitfalls of aging. One day, Jack drinks the potion and wakes up in the year 2010. In addition to the marvels of futuristic “rapid transit facilities,” Jack is shocked to discover that men are in the social and political minority, and do not have the right to vote. In an attempt to “restore order,” Jack becomes a ‘suffragehim’ and is sent to jail for his activities. The female mayor of the city falls in love with Jack and offers to free him from prison if he will marry her. Jack wishes to restore “the rights of men,” however, and refuses to leave prison and accept the proposal unless the mayor signs a decree giving men their liberty. Upon signing, the end of the film shows Jack correcting the bride during the wedding ceremony, leading the Mayor down the aisle instead of vice versa and transferring the veil from his head to her head.<sup>8</sup> A reviewer for *The New York*

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<sup>6</sup> Sloan, “Sexual Warfare in the Silent Cinema,” 417.

<sup>7</sup> Wexman, “Suffering and Suffrage: Birth, the Female Body, and Women’s Choices in D. W. Griffith’s *Way Down East*,” 53-54.

<sup>8</sup> *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1910-12-28; *Moving Picture World*, 1910-12-24 & 17, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918*, CD-ROM. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

*Dramatic Mirror* is correct in its assessment of the film, writing “it is a man’s picture; the laugh seems on the ladies.”<sup>9</sup> The idea of a woman mayor might not have been too far-fetched for many women in 1910 to find laughable. The man in the film finds himself in a position without power, yet manages to win the heart of a powerful woman and easily free men from their social standing. As the film shows, a woman, if given power, is ultimately controlled by her heart. This scene can be read differently. On the one hand it mocks many female suffrage “fighting tactics,” as suffragists, in an attempt to not appear too extremist and alienable, exploited conservative ideas of feminine virtue in order to assert their citizenship and reform desires. In the film, the man assumes effeminate passions to woo the Mayor. On the other hand, those sympathetic to the cause can see this as proof that these tactics can work in politics. The film also toys with the fears men harbored concerning the loss of power over females in public spaces, a threat to masculinity and manhood. One thing is unclear, however. Reviewers fail to mention if women gave up their right to vote in giving the men the right, therefore foreshadowing things to come and providing hope for the suffragists fight.

As a fledgling motion picture company, not yet in its first full year of production, Thanhouser appears to have followed “the formula” in their representation of suffragists and the imaginary dangers they posed. This assumption is supported by the fact that *Looking Forward* was an adaptation of a contemporary short story by James Oliver Curwood, a quick, proven tale for which to adapt to screen.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1910-12-28, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, It would be interesting to compare and contrast the literary story to the cinema adaptation to find production changes that may support the paper’s thesis.

Over time, Thanhouser productions become evolved to offer elements that appeal to a variety of viewers. In *Courting Across the Court* (1911) a daughter of a suffragist officer and lawyer is forced to join the movement, follow her mother's career path, and attend a suffrage parade downtown. Before going she is courted by two different men: one considerate of the suffrage cause and the other not sympathetic. Prodding her daughter to like the sympathetic male, the mother is dismayed that she unfortunately fancies the other. When the daughter is forced to march in the parade, she sneaks away to cheer on the man her mother disapproves of, in a marathon race nearby. The film ends with the mother celebrating the parade and its accomplishments with her supporters, including the sympathetic young man, when she looks out the window and sees her daughter being wedded across the street, "becoming a happy and contented wife."<sup>11</sup> Several stereotypes are presented in the film. The ending is reminiscent of the invented melodramatic endings associated with industry produced suffrage films, as the mother neglects her child, too caught up in her public life and work. The film also celebrates traditional notions of patriarchal order. For example, the daughter sneaks away from the suffrage parade to watch her "hero" run and win first prize in a marathon, reinforcing the belief of male physical prowess, cult of masculinity, and superiority of the public domain. What is more interesting in this film is the use of actual footage recorded of a 'Votes for Women' suffrage parade and marathon in New York City. While the studio can manipulate how they portray the suffrage movement in films, in this case they also used real footage to show actual suffrage activities.

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<sup>11</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 1911-06-24; *Billboard*, 1911-07-01; *Morning Telegraph*, 1911-07-02, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

Thanhouser used footage of New York suffrage parades in more than one film. The “Votes for Women’s” parade, like the majority of suffrage public displays in America, were relatively peaceful and subdued when compared to many of the violent marches occurring and being filmed in England. They were used in the Thanhouser productions to add realism to the film, a demand echoed by critics and viewers alike during the time.<sup>12</sup> The impact of this footage on portrayals of suffragists is that it presented them as “real” people and not exaggerated “cartoon characters.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as mentioned earlier, many suffrage depictions were falsely and largely overstated, especially in comedy; but the footage of “real” suffragists and their passive presentation in the parade made their representation less than embellished, perhaps short-circuiting typical stereotypes of the day. An interesting discovery in the reviews of the film is the disagreement among critics as to whether the film is a comedy or a drama, a product of its enhanced realism. If the film is seen as a comedy, it mocks the mother’s role with the suffrage movement. As a drama, the film explores the tensions between generations, genders, and courting processes. The conflicting views among critics are probably indicative of the conflicting views among society about how to view “suffragettes.”

To further enhance realism in their productions, Thanhouser adapted more theatrical acting styles for the camera. PhD candidate, Fran Pici has examined the evolution of this phenomenon in Thanhouser films, linking it to existing scholarly works and showing how Thanhouser actors blended histrionic (more theatrical acting) and verisimilitude techniques into a style that communicated human thoughts and action to

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<sup>12</sup> Charlie Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907-1913* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Sloan, “Sexual Warfare in the Silent Cinema,” 416.

viewers in a more realistic manner.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this development became an industry-wide trend, but Thanhouser was regularly praised by critics for its progression and innovation. Similar to the actual footage of the parade, greater realism in acting helped diffuse exaggerated and radical stereotypes in suffrage depictions. This is evident in the Thanhouser production entitled, *A Militant Suffragette* (1912), a comedy about Mary, whose fiancé threatens to leave her because she joins a women’s suffrage group. Influenced by “Amazon suffragettes” from England, Mary “goes on a rampage” for support of her cause, apparently smashing in store windows with chairs. She is subsequently arrested and placed in prison. When her fiancé is notified of her detainment, he becomes furious, goes on a rampage, attacks a police officer, and ends up in prison with his wife, where they are married. Meanwhile, their parents are clueless to the circumstances surrounding their arrest and marriage.<sup>15</sup> This comedy is by far the most exaggerated and stereotypical of all the Thanhouser depictions of female suffragists in content. It shows suffragists causing disorder and destruction in the community, a fear held by many people regarding their potential freedoms in public spaces. Interestingly, commenting on the acting by the women who played the British “militant suffragettes” a reviewer from *Moving Picture World* deduced “the two players are clever enough to keep from burlesquing the cranks too much and make them seem like real people.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Fran Pici, “Acting for the Camera: Dramatic Styles in Thanhouser Studio Films,” (2003) archived on <http://thanhouser.org/research.htm>; For broader study see Roberta Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> *Morning Telegraph*, 1912-12-29; *Moving Picture World*, 1912-12-28, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 1912-12-28, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

Recognition of more “natural” acting from the British suffragettes and typecasting them as militant deflects inflated stereotyping and exaggeration of the American suffragists in the film, placing the responsibility of destruction on a foreign other. It in effect makes the American suffragist “unbelievable” and perhaps softens male anxieties of her actions. As for female viewers, it could possibly scare women from the suffrage movement or attract them to the cause due to the empowerment of relinquishment. Also, the film deviates from the stereotypical theme that the unruly suffragist is punished. Although Mary goes to jail, she gets married, is released after ten days, and presumably lives happily ever after. Viewers, however, are apparently not made aware if she continued her suffragist activities. The film leaves the possibility open that she continued supporting the cause, minus the rebellious violence.

Similar negative sentiments toward foreign suffragists are found in *Mrs. Pinkhurst's Proxy* (1914) a comedy about a male con-artist who dresses up and impersonates a famous militant British suffragist, traveling around the nation receiving payment for his speeches. The film is stereotypical in the fact it promotes the stereotype that suffragists were masculine, as the imposter was able to tour for over six months before he was captured. It is interesting, however, that this is the only Thanhouser suffragist film where cross-dressing is evident and used to express male anxieties about struggles over sexual power, a common theme in other industry produced films. Appealing to American male and female viewers, latent apprehension is placed upon British suffragists, like previously, suggesting the movement here is less aggressive. Thanhouser films’ use of British suffragist as other attributes demeaning characteristics on outsiders and reduces harsh stereotypes by allaying certain male anxieties, and

promoting the problem as foreign. The films may serve as a warning to Americans about what suffrage could become. On the other hand, they could empower American suffragettes to follow the British role model. With the ambiguous story lines, viewers could interpret the films in different ways.

Ambiguous plots and storylines also alleviated stereotypes and fears over suffragist, as evident in *A Campaign Manageress* (1913) The film showcases a young “suffragette” named Edith whose father is the owner and editor of the local newspaper, *The Clarion*. Edith falls in love with a young, handsome, reform candidate who is running for Sheriff, but her father vehemently refuses to support his political beliefs and candidacy, instead choosing to back the corrupt incumbent, a member of the “local machine.” Edith’s father falls ill and she secretly takes over the editorial practices of the paper, clandestinely publishing an editorial endorsing her beau. Printing a “tricky” article is the type of poor politics suffragists wished to eradicate and thoroughly believed their presence would encourage in the political world. In this sense, the film is anti-suffragist as Edith succumbs to the same “dirty” politics as the “local machine.” When the incumbent reads the editorial Edith published, he storms down to the paper’s office to “horsewhip its writer.” As the crowd gathers in front of *The Clarion*’s headquarters, Edith, holding the whip and revolver he wished to use on the editor, escorts the incumbent out of the building. When the mob realizes he is going to hurt a young woman, they throw stones at him and chase him away. Edith’s boyfriend wins the election and the film ends with her explaining ‘All is fair in politics, especially for a campaign manageress who loves her candidate.’<sup>17</sup> The admission of guilt of participating in dirty

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<sup>17</sup> Quote found in *The Moving Picture World*, 1913-15-11---other reviews of the film can be found in *Reel Life*, 1913-08-11; *The Morning Telegraph*, 1913-11-16; *The Evening Standard* (New Rochelle) 1913-09-

politics again can be seen as negative propaganda for the suffrage movement; however, the motive of the plot is not clear. Even though Edith “plays dirty” in her political involvement she overthrows what seemingly is the *more* corrupt politician. A member of the “machine,” the incumbent attempted to inflict physical punishment on his detractors and bully his opponents to achieve his ends. Edith can be read as the lesser of two evils and seen as a positive force in a corrupt political world. Viewers can also view Edith as overcoming the inherently brutal tactics of politics and exemplifies the belief that women can survive political participation in the public arena.

Other confusing storylines in Thanhouser productions follow the aforementioned film. Including *Foiling Father’s Foes* (1915) a melodrama with a plot almost identical to *A Campaign Manageress*,<sup>18</sup> and *The Milk Man’s Revenge* (1913) a comedy in which a female suffragists’ milkman spikes her milk with alcohol because she does not approve of his desire to date her maid. The intoxicated “suffragette” attends a Temperance rally and causes much disorder. Typically the film mocks the belief that suffragists wreak havoc on their community, but because of the circumstances, even those who are anti-suffrage are asked to sympathize with the suffragette. None of the reviews detail any incident where she may have provoked the milkman other than her refusal to allow him

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27; and *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, 1913-11-05, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> See: *Reel Life*, 1915-11-27; *Bioscope* 1916-11-05; *Moving Picture World*, 1915-11-27, in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

to date her maid.<sup>19</sup> For the more cynically minded, however, perhaps the film presents a surreptitious plan to disrupt female suffragist and Temperance rallies.

*A Modern Lochinvar* (1913) is a drama about a shy bachelor named Percy who has a crush on the daughter of female suffragist. The mother approves of Percy because he is the “meek type” who should be controlled by a woman. She also, however, wishes to set her daughter up with an impressionable young lawyer who is sympathetic to the suffrage movement, ultimately sharing the stage with the mother at a convention. While the lawyer is on stage announcing his support for women’s political rights, Percy builds the courage to ask for the daughter’s hand and she accepts. It is difficult to find many negative reactions to suffragists in the film’s storyline. Although the mother comes across as domineering in her comment about Percy, no sexual power roles are ruffled in the film, since the daughter was not in the suffrage movement. If anything, the film reinforces the power women held in the confines of the home, a position female suffragist did not want to lose-- even suffrage produced films assured viewer’s traditional notions of womanhood and heterosexual relations remained the same.<sup>20</sup> The only negative depiction we can attribute to the suffrage movement is that the lawyer’s participation in the cause prevented him from ending up with the young woman, indicating perhaps a threat to his manhood, yet there is no evidence he liked her anyway. In this drama, everyone wins.

By 1916, humiliating stereotypes and ambiguous storylines in Thanhouser suffrage films disappear—in fact, throughout the industry suffrage theme films all but

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<sup>19</sup> *Reel Life*, 1913-12-06, *Moving Picture World*, 1913-12-20; in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> See: Stamp, *Movie-struck Girls*, 178-179.

disappear. Indeed there is little confusion in *Woman in Politics* (1916), Thanhouser's last production containing suffragists, as to how it should be read. A five-reel feature length drama, the story follows the pursuits of a young woman doctor on a crusade to clean up the city's building and sanitation codes is wrongly fired from corrupt politicians after they fail to comply to her complaints. Foiling a plant that would have landed her in prisons she ultimately brings the entire political machine to its knees.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the film abandons all negative stereotypes suffragists and is a testament to the strides the movement had gained in real life. Louis Harrison, a reviewer for *Motion Picture World* wrote, "This five-part production from the Thanhouser studios presents one of the best constructed photoplays of the season. The plot is a good one, and is developed consistently. The story is an excellent plea for woman suffrage."<sup>22</sup>

Thanhouser's uncertainty and vagueness in its depiction of the votes-for-women movement may stem from the company's mission to make high-quality films for primarily middle-class viewers. Having experience as a reputable stage manager, including the Academy of Music in Milwaukee, Edwin Thanhouser was accustomed to staging "high-class" entertainment. As David Bowers points out, Thanhouser adapted many of the theatrical features to Thanhouser's early efforts, and critics praised the company for its "story content, photography, and artistic quality," we see this in more realistic acting.<sup>23</sup> Thanhouser's adjustments undoubtedly generated greater verisimilitude, in addition to more sophisticated plot, narrative, and character development--part of a

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<sup>21</sup> *Sunday Metropolis*, 1916-04-23; *Reel Life* 1916-01-01, *Morning Telegraph*, 1916-01-02; in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> *Motion Picture World*, 1916-01-15; in (ed.) Q. David Bowers *Thanhouser Films: An Encyclopedia and History 1908 to 1918, CD-ROM*. Portland, OR: Thanhouser Company Film Preservation, 2001.

<sup>23</sup> <http://thanouser.org/1909.htm>

larger movement in the industry as companies gradually employed varying production and aesthetic changes to manufacture more mature, predictable, and potentially lucrative films.<sup>24</sup>

Analyzing the aftereffects of suffrage produced motion pictures in the silent era, Stamp concludes that many exhibitors were eager to show any films dealing with middle-class women, degrading or not. For the films not only encouraged these women to come to the theater and spend money, but were integral to the exhibitor movement to “remodel” their image. Exhibitors were not concerned with stereotypical or unjust treatment of pro- or anti-suffragists; rather they were fearful of films which contained too radical a message associated with the movement. For example, exhibitors were queasy of over-solicitation or excessive politicization of reformers social, economic, and political concerns, like the suffragist message of ridding vice and immorality in politics, thus potentially scaring away customers not keen to the message. When the suffrage movement became too radical in Thanhouser productions they used stereotypes associated with British “militant” suffragist to appeal to exhibitors. From this vantage point, it can be argued that exhibitors encouraged the depiction of the suffrage movement in film, as the contemporary debate persuaded viewers to come to the theaters, especially middle-class women. But they seem to harbor no qualms against negative depictions of the films

Analyzing suffrage themed films produced by Thanhouser studios allows scholars to reevaluate certain assumptions regarding specific types of “social problem” films during the silent-era. Indeed, depictions of suffragists and the vote-for-women’s

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the transition from the “cinema of attractions” to “Classical Hollywood Cinema” see Charlie Kiel, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907-1913* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

movement in the company's pictures reveal a complexity not noticed in previous historical analysis of such industry produced films. Three primary themes appear in Thanhouser productions which undermine negative suffragist typecasting and reduce anxieties associated with the movement, either not found or overlooked in formulaic industry pictures of the era: added realism, use of foreigner as other, and multifaceted plot and narrative development. The studio's depictions of suffragism are ambiguous in their support, or lack thereof, providing films which can be read in multiple ways to both attract and satisfy both pro and anti-suffrage supporters. Exactly how this affected the suffrage movement directly, or filmgoer's attitudes and beliefs concerning the cause, or exhibitors, is part of a larger project. Maybe the ambiguity took some of the sting out of public debate surrounding the movement? Perhaps it added to it? Did they encourage people to accept women's rights or shun them? Whatever the effect, the Thanhouser productions, for the most part, maintained a middle ground in their portrayal of the suffrage movement, offering some appeal and potential controversy in every film.