

## Who is Francesca da Rimini? Problems of Historical Reception

William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson

Volume 2, Number 2-3, Spring 1992

Cinéma et Réception

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1001077ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001077ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Cinémas

ISSN

1181-6945 (print)

1705-6500 (digital)

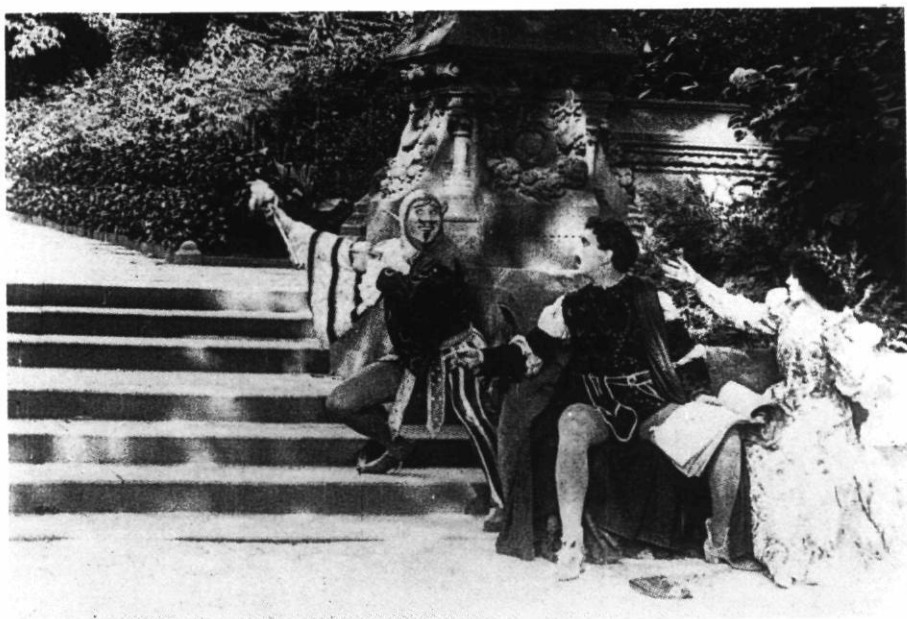
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Cite this article

Uricchio, W. & Pearson, R. E. (1992). Who is Francesca da Rimini? Problems of Historical Reception. *Cinémas*, 2(2-3), 32–55. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1001077ar>

### Article abstract

This paper uses intertextuel evidence to approach the vexed topic of historical reception, focusing upon the ways in which certain groups of hypothetical readers may have made sense of Vitagraph's *Francesca da Rimini* (1908), a film based upon five lines of Dante. The authors hope to demonstrate that supplementing formal textual analysis and industry discourse with intertextual evidence can more fully illuminate conditions of reception by permitting speculation about historically grounded readings of specific texts.



*Francesca da Rimini* de la Vitagraph Company (1908)  
Coll.: National Film Archive London

# Who is Francesca da Rimini? Problems of Historical Reception

William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson<sup>1</sup>

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article utilise le mode intertextuel pour aborder la question controversée de la réception historique, en considérant les façons selon lesquelles certains groupes de lecteurs hypothétiques ont donné sens à de *Francesca da Rimini* (1908) de la Vitagraph, film reposant sur cinq vers de Dante. Les auteurs cherchent à démontrer qu'en ajoutant le mode intertextuel à l'analyse formelle textuelle et au discours de l'industrie, il est possible d'éclairer davantage les conditions de réception en permettant des discussions à propos de lectures historiquement établies de textes spécifiques.

## ABSTRACT

This paper uses intertextual evidence to approach the vexed topic of historical reception, focusing upon the ways in which certain groups of hypothetical readers may have made sense of Vitagraph's *Francesca da Rimini* (1908), a film based upon five lines of Dante. The authors hope to demonstrate that supplementing formal textual analysis and industry discourse with intertextual evidence can more fully illuminate conditions of reception by permitting speculation about historically grounded readings of specific texts.

[The moving picture] has brought amusement to the door of the work-driven sweat-shop worker, the tired out, overworked, underpaid mechanic, the poor house slave of a mother whose family cares keep her drudging from early morn till late, but who can manage to slip around the corner and see the five cent picture show, the only amusement she has, the thousands of cheap laborers in every field who cannot afford the luxury of twenty-five cent or fifty-cent theatres, but can get amusement for themselves and their families at five cents a head (*Motography*, 100).

During the week of February 1, 1908, the Vitagraph Company of America, the largest film studio in the United States, released four reels as their contribution to nickelodeon viewers' five cents of amusement: *Sold Again*, *The Thieving Hand*, *A Cowboy Elopement*, and *Caught*. The next week Vitagraph released *Galvanic Fluid, or More Fun With Liquid Electricity*, a sequel to their popular comedy *Galvanic Fluid*, and *Francesca da Rimini, or The Two Brothers*. This last film, based on five lines in Canto V of Dante's *Inferno*, appears more than a little out of place in the company of the more common comedies and melodramas of the period often characterized by critics as "cheap," "vicious," and "vulgar." It also appears a little out of place with respect to its potential viewers, the workers and immigrants whom the industry perceived as constituting the bulk of the nickelodeon audience.<sup>2</sup> Why might Vitagraph have made a film derived from such a "high-culture" source and, even more importantly, what might the "work-driven sweat-shop worker, the tired out, overworked, underpaid mechanic, the poor house slave of a mother" have made of such a film? And what would those more "genteel" classes sought by the film industry as part of its bid for respectability and audience expansion have made of a fifteen minute, silent, black and white representation of Dante?

Given the current academic research agenda, it is not surprising that we should ask such questions nor that an article asking such questions should be included in a special issue on the topic of reception. The study of audiences and their receptions is a growth industry within mass communications, cultural studies and film studies. Since others have provided overviews of the developments within these fields, we simply wish briefly to position our approach

to historical reception *vis-à-vis* the work of other scholars.<sup>3</sup> Reception research within mass communications/cultural studies has focused almost exclusively on relatively presentist concerns, much of it examining the process by which real viewers produce meaning in their interactions with specific texts. Most exemplary in this latter regard are the oft-cited works of Janice Radway, David Morley, and Ien Ang, which have led the shift away from the quantitative positivism that had dominated mass communications for decades toward the consideration of more qualitative issues. Given the infinite range of evidence available for these presentist studies, these researchers have of necessity had to construct *a priori* formulations to delimit the relevant data.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast, film scholars have increasingly focused upon historical reception issues. Janet Staiger has explored the theoretical and methodological problems inherent in historical reception studies, indicating the evidence constraints which have forced the majority of scholars working in this area to explore conditions of reception rather than reception *per se*.<sup>5</sup> Thus, film historians have investigated how such factors as theater architecture, publicity/promotional campaigns, regional attitudes and exhibition conditions have generally structured viewers' filmgoing experiences but have not considered how these factors may inflect the reception of specific texts.<sup>6</sup> Other historians have sought homologous intertexts that reinforce what they see as the meaning of particular films.<sup>7</sup> We cast a wider net, looking at the manner in which the array of meanings circulating in a particular culture might interact with a specific text to produce many and diverse interpretations. What knowledge, derived from encounters with cultural artifacts in their daily lives, would viewers have brought with them to the nickelodeon that would have inflected the meanings they made from particular films?<sup>8</sup>

While, as we have argued elsewhere, contextual factors such as the industry's reconfiguration during this transitional period and the social upheaval occurring in the turn-of-the-century United States undoubtedly shaped both conditions of production and reception, this paper uses intertextual evidence to approach the vexed topic of historical reception, focusing upon the ways in which certain groups of hypothetical readers may have made

sense of *Francesca da Rimini*. We hope to demonstrate that supplementing formal textual analysis and industry discourse with intertextual evidence can more fully illuminate conditions of reception by permitting speculation about historically grounded readings of specific texts.

As we suggested above, those studying the reception of living subjects face a potentially overwhelming plethora of evidence that must be delimited by some *a priori* construction of method/theory. By contrast, those hoping to arrive at some understanding of the responses of long-silent viewers face the problem of sparse and biased evidence. Though one may search for the traces left by marginalized voices such as workers and immigrants, historical filtration makes it easier to find intertextual evidence that related to dominant social formations. Texts originating from dominant social formations are more likely to survive the vicissitudes of historical filtration than those originating from marginalized social formations, since they are produced, circulated and preserved by institutions of cultural reproduction such as schools, libraries and publishing houses.

But not all institutions of cultural reproduction were equivalent in their impact, in their economic base or in their clienteles. Some state supported and almost inescapable institutions of cultural reproduction, such as schools and public festivities, circulated canonized expressive forms and delimited meanings thereof across all social formations. Some more "voluntary" institutions, such as libraries and churches, which could potentially reach all social formations, though in practice probably did not, circulated canonized and non-canonized forms and had fewer mechanisms for constraining interpretation. Commercial institutions of cultural reproduction, such as publishing, the theatre and advertising, tended to define and serve particular social formations, reflecting a more idiosyncratic array of interpretations than state supported or mandated institutions and resulting in the most diverse mix of canonized and non-canonized forms. Collecting intertextual evidence from as wide a range of institutions of cultural reproduction as possible while remaining sensitive to the differences among them provides a partial corrective to the problem of sparse and biased evidence.

In the case of *Francesca da Rimini*, our intertextual evidence tended to be produced in and circulated by "voluntary" and commercially-driven institutions, rather than more pervasive and even state-mandated institutions, and thus stands in sharp contrast to intertexts related to such other cultural figures as Shakespeare and Washington. This pattern of restricted circulation makes it particularly difficult to assess the exposure of more marginalized social formations to Dante-related texts. By contrast, Shakespeare's presence in the public schools or Washington's presence in public monuments and festivities means that one can assume fairly general exposure to these figures. The more delimited circulation of Dante related-texts suggests that they served to distinguish one social formation from another, rather than, as was the case with Shakespeare and Washington, to integrate diverse social formations into a common culture. Here the concept of "distinction," as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, proves useful. Bourdieu's massive study of French "taste," *Distinction*, examines how the production and consumption/reception of cultural objects and expressive forms simultaneously activate, create and maintain social/cultural hierarchies by fostering an individual's identification with a certain social formation and opposition to others.<sup>9</sup>

And now a word about the nature of our intertextual approach. Using what we assume to be the producers' intertextual references as an entry point, we adduce a broader framework which includes a multiplicity of cultural artifacts ranging from paintings and plays to postcards and calendars. We use intertextuality in two different senses here, distinguishing between a narrow construction of directly related textual references and a broader construction which includes less "directly related" cultural expressions. Intertextuality in the former sense is consistent with the traditional approaches of such disciplines as art and theatre history. Intertextuality in the latter sense derives from recent work in critical/cultural studies and takes the world itself as text, seeking homologies between the wide-ranging cultural exposures of various hypothetical viewers and a specific film text. Intertextuality thus embraces everything from plays and paintings to advertising and stereographs to belief structures. Identifying the social formations among which various cultural artifacts circulated, we can then

roughly estimate the probable cultural exposures of specific populations. This approach enables us to hypothesize a range of possible receptions and provides a means for discussing hypothetical historical viewers and groups of viewers' interactions with texts.

While such an approach potentially provides an almost infinite array of intertextual evidence, we seek to be exemplary rather than exhaustive, using cultural artifacts that will suggest the broad expanse of reception and the probable response of hypothetical readers. Dante's rather limited circulation poses a special challenge that our expanded sense of intertextuality permits us to deal with. Those institutions of cultural reproduction that circulated Dante-related texts among dominant social formations are easily identified, but we can also demonstrate that those same institutions also circulated non Dante-related texts that may have inflected the response to *Francesca da Rimini* among marginalized social formations. If the trade press's characterization of the composition of the nickelodeon audience was correct, the non Dante related texts should be given more prominence in the conditions of reception for this specific film than should those Dante related texts circulating among populations that did not yet constitute a major component of the audience.

The above sketches an intertextually based approach for extrapolating probable and historically grounded hypothetical readings from an interaction between a specific film and its broadly construed intertextual frame. Our central assumption is that any individual's meanings are conditioned by his/her socially determined experiences in the world and that the shaping of those meanings with regard to materially embodied expressive forms is most proximately evident in socially circulated interpretations. This is neither to assert a causal and unilateral relationship between these socially circulated interpretations and the meanings individuals make from texts nor to preclude the consideration of such vital social determinations as gender and ethnicity, for, as Tony Bennett points out, both texts and readers exist at the juncture of historically determined conditions and are "(. . .) socially and politically mobilised in different ways within different class practices, differentially inscribed within the practices of



educational, cultural and linguistic institutions and so on" (224). Readings, then, are produced by a dialectically inflected process with intertextuality as a crucial activating component. As Bennett and Woollacott say,

The process of reading is not one in which the reader and the text meet as abstractions but one in which the inter-textually organised reader meets the inter-textually organised text. The exchange is never a pure one between two unsullied entities, existing separately from one another, but is rather "muddied" by the cultural debris which attach to both texts and readers in the determinate conditions which regulate the specific forms of their encounter. (56)

Hence, the reader does not precede or create the text any more than the text precedes or creates the reader, but rather both result from the dialectical interaction of intertextual and social determinants.<sup>10</sup>

Real historical subjects doubtless had multiple and conflicting intertextual exposures, that together with their unique social/cultural positionings would infinitely complicate the possibility for reconstructing any "actual" reading. This paper will not, therefore, concern itself with the meanings that real historical subjects may have constructed from filmic images and narratives nor the pleasures that they may have derived from them. Instead, we employ the term "readings" to refer to the hypothetical, though historically grounded, meanings produced by hypothetical historical readers and groups of readers. We arrive at these probable readings through examining the circulations of particular intertexts and how the probable intertextual exposures of readers and groups of readers may have inflected their production of meanings in specific textual encounters. This examination of the interpretations in circulation at any given historical moment constitutes at least as significant a component in the conditions of reception as those others thus far examined by scholars.

The remainder of this paper exemplifies our intertextual approach through examining the conditions of reception for *Francesca da Rimini*. Let us begin with the close textual analysis that was once the most important instrument in the film scholar's methodological tool-box. The one-reel film concerns a triangle among the hunchbacked Lanciotto, Lord of Rimini, his bride,

Francesca, and his handsome brother, Paolo. Paolo serves as his brother's emissary to Francesca, who gives Paolo a locket for Lanciotto but does not see her betrothed until the wedding day. Francesca, who immediately fell in love with Paolo, recoils in horror from her fiancé's deformity, but goes through with the ceremony. After the marriage, Lanciotto, called to the wars, leaves Francesca in Paolo's protection. The two begin a love affair, spied upon by Pepe, the jester, who throughout the film has been providing a running gestural commentary on the action. Pepe brings the news to Lanciotto who kills him in a rage. Returning home, Lanciotto discovers the truth for himself and kills Francesca and Paolo as well. Lanciotto's suicide constitutes the denouement.

The film consists of fifteen shots,<sup>11</sup> thirteen of these in the long shot tableau style typical of the period, while two are insert close-ups of the locket. These shots appear to be motivated by Lanciotto's glance, and while they do not resemble the point of view structure of the classical Hollywood cinema, they might be said to provide a degree of subjectivity. The action takes place on painted theatrical sets, as well as exterior locations, both typical of the period, though the costuming and sets seem elaborate relative to other films of the period.

Our recounting of the narrative and our brief summary of the film's formal structure can, by themselves, tell us nothing, but in conjunction with the intertextual evidence of contemporary films, do reveal how this particular film's signifying practices compare to the standard ones of the period. From this perspective, the two insert close-ups of the locket, representing a somewhat unusual editing pattern, constitute the most interesting component of the film for those employing only formal analysis.<sup>12</sup> But this approach reveals nothing about the original conditions of reception for *Francesca da Rimini*. Let us then broaden the scope of inquiry to include the producer's and trade press discourse, unfortunately minimal in this case. *The Views and Film Index* ran the following Vitagraph advertisement summarizing the film's plot:

*Francesca da Rimini, or the two brothers*

Francesca receives letter from Lanciotto (a hunchback) asking for her hand in marriage — Falls in love with the brother Paolo who delivers the message — The marriage is consummated, and shortly

afterward Lanciotto is called away to the wars, leaving his bride under protection of his brother — Paolo betrays his trust — Francesca is false to her vows — Bebbe [Pepe], the court jester, discovers the lovers and proceeds to camp and informs his master — Lanciotto kills the jester and returns to the palace, enters unexpectedly and finds the lovers in fond embrace — He kills his wife, then his brother, laughs insanely at his victims and stabs himself to death. (16)

This synopsis and the advertisement from which it was drawn make no mention of Dante, thus avoiding "high-culture" associations for those not already familiar with the story of Francesca and perhaps activating non Dante related intertextual associations to which we will return below. Had we more extensive producer's and trade press discourse, we could infer a great deal about the film's positioning in the marketplace, an important component of the conditions of reception, but would still require additional data to speculate about probable viewer response.<sup>13</sup> Hence we now proceed to our intertextual evidence.

Although the average late-twentieth century resident of the United States may well ask "Who is Francesca da Rimini?," this would not have been the case in both turn-of-the-century England and the United States, where a veritable Dante craze existed, at least among a restricted segment of society. As Henry Beers, author of *A History of English Romanticism in the Nineteenth Century*, put it:

Since the middle of the century Dante study and Dante literature in English-speaking lands have waxed enormously. Dante societies have been founded in England and America. Almost every year sees another edition, a new commentary or a fresh translation in prose, in blank verse, in *terza rima*, or in some form of stanza (...) Not that he will ever be popular, in Shakespeare's way; and yet it is far gone when the aesthete in a comic opera is described as a "Francesca da Rimini young man". (104)

The fact that the Oscar Wilde character in Gilbert and Sullivan's 1881 comic opera *Patience* describes himself as "a Francesca da Rimini, niminy, piminy, Je-ne-sais-quoi young man!" shows that Dante was indeed well known within certain social formations but also seems intended to criticize Dante devotees as effete, silly and affected.

In the United States, upper and middle class women seemed particularly enamored of the Italian poet. *The Ladies' Home Journal* published William Dean Howells' article on the poet while "enterprising publishers tried to exploit this Dante furore by issuing elegant Dante calendars..." (LaPiana, 148). A set of Dante postcards, "A Visit to Hell with Dante — The Italian Poet," (circa 1900) cost fifty cents for twenty five "views,"<sup>14</sup> at least half a day's pay for such wage earners as elevator men, tailors and grocery clerks.<sup>15</sup> Dante societies and courses proliferated at universities. A correspondent to *The Dial* noted that "The catalogues of many of our leading universities now offer special courses in Dante, and the heaven of this study is at work in our national life" (327).

Contemporary comments indicate that Francesca da Rimini may have been among the best known of Dante's characters. The nineteenth century produced numerous literary and dramatic expressions of the story of Francesca. As early as 1867, *Wilke's Spirit of the Times: The American Gentleman's Magazine* reviewed a French theatrical production of the tale, assuming widespread reader acquaintance with the eponymous heroine.

(...) of all of Dante's heroines the one most loved; of all of Dante's verses those most familiar to the world. If the English reader knows nothing else of the great Italian master, he is at least conversant with the story of Francesca.

Sixteen years later, in 1883, *The New York Times* traced the lineage of George H. Boker's dramatic version of the story.

The story of "Francesca da Rimini" is one of the loveliest and most mournful episodes in poetic literature. It has been told by Boccaccio and Dante, and nobly told by Dante. Leigh Hunt's graceful account of this melancholy love tale is, of course, familiar to all readers.

The Dante craze seems to have been limited to fairly restricted social formations, among which engagement with Dante and the competence to proliferate readings served as a secondary marker of distinction. Despite this, however, our research indicates that Dante texts circulated more widely, though Dante was nowhere nearly as pervasive a figure in turn-of-the-century American culture as was Shakespeare. In 1897, a correspondent to *The Dial*

noted with amazement that in San Francisco "(...) is a settlement of Italian fishermen, whose condition is apparently without an aspiration other than to have a supply of the black bread they eat and sour wine they drink; yet *these people support a society for the study of Dante* " (Graydon, 110). In New York City two organizations devoted to the adult education of workers and immigrants included Dante in their cultural offerings. The Bureau of Lectures, the continuing education component of the New York City public schools, sponsored several annual lectures on Dante during the first decade of the century. In the 1906-1907 season their offerings included "Dante and His Friends" and "Dante's Divine Comedy."<sup>16</sup> In 1909 there were two more lectures in English, "Dante, The Soul's Pilgrimage," and "Dante, Poet of Humanity" and two in Italian, "Dante's Divine Comedy" and "Dante Alighieri."<sup>17</sup> In 1899 and again in 1901, The People's Institute, a progressive civic organization, gave a course of six lectures on the Divine Comedy of Dante.<sup>18</sup>

These and similar lectures given throughout the country reflect the attempts of some within the dominant social formations to share their values and meanings with more marginalized social formations, since the lecturers were often university professors engaged in university extension programs. But the Dante-related texts usually encountered by these marginalized social formations may have been of a somewhat more sensational nature, consonant with Vitagraph's plot summary emphasizing adultery, murder and suicide. For example, George B. Bunnell, touted as the "legitimate successor to P. T. Barnum," featured a Dante's Inferno of "waxworks, mechanical contrivances and "pictorial views"" as the principle attraction in his Bowery dime museum.<sup>19</sup> This carnivalesque encounter with the Italian poet probably extended beyond dime museums to amusement parks. Even today, the decaying Coney Island has a ride called "Dante's Inferno," while the 1935 film of the same name told the story of a park built around an elaborate reproduction of the circles of Hell.

Having established that Dante texts circulated primarily among dominant social formations, we now look for intertextual evidence that may enable us to speculate about probable readings of Vitagraph's film. Given that the myriad versions of the Francesca

story in circulation, based as they were on a mere five lines, differed radically, we first try to identify the producers most proximate intertextual reference. Of the multiple dramatic versions in circulation in the decade preceding their production, Vitagraph, although silent on the subject, seems to have drawn directly upon Boker's *Francesca da Rimini*, originally written in 1855 but most notably staged by the actor/manager Lawrence Barrett in his 1883 and subsequent productions. As Boker said of his distinctive version, "Of course, you know the story, every one does; but you (...) do not know it as I have treated it" (Evans, 71).<sup>20</sup> Marked congruences between the Boker play and the Vitagraph film point to the Vitagraph producers' familiarity with this particular version. These congruences may have caused viewers to reference the Boker play which may thus have formed an important component not only of the conditions of production but of the conditions of reception for the film. Among these congruences are set design, the narrative prominence of the jester and the sympathetic characterization of Lanciotto, with the portrayal of the hunchback perhaps most important in terms of predisposing viewers toward a particular interpretation of Vitagraph's Lanciotto.

The Boker play, in contrast to some other versions, presents Lanciotto not as an evil monster, but as a complex character who, acutely aware of his physical shortcomings, resists marriage with Francesca. The Lawrence Barrett production of the Boker play cast the actor-manager as Lanciotto, suggesting that theatrical signifying practices may have augmented that character's narrative centrality. While we have no prompt book to confirm this, reviews indicate that one signifying practice, Barrett's performance, did reinforce Boker's sympathetic depiction of Lanciotto. The *New York Times* said: "The first glimpse of Lanciotto reveals him as a man bearing a burden of secret sorrows; outwardly stern, his manner [is] marked by insuavity (...) Inwardly the hunchback keenly feels the degradation of his affliction (...)" (Jan. 1885).

A viewer of the Vitagraph film who had seen the Boker version may have been predisposed to sympathize with Lanciotto. For this viewer, the editing pattern of the insert locket shot and Lanciotto's collapse after the murders may have been seen as permitting

access to Lanciotto's subjectivity, while constructing him as a sympathetic character. In this case, the determinate operations of the text work in concert with a particular intertextual frame to produce a particular reading. But does specifying the intertextual conditions of production enable us totally to specify the intertextual conditions of reception? In other words, would the film's viewers have deployed the same intertextual frame as the film's producers? Probably not, which requires us to adduce further evidence, encompassing a full spectrum of intertexts from the restricted to the popular.



*Francesca da Rimini* de la Vitagraph Company (1908)  
Coll.: National Film Archive London

*New York Times* reviews of two other theatrical versions of the Francesca story, one by Gabriele d'Annunzio and the other by F. Marion Crawford, indicate that the Lanciotto of these plays conformed to a prevalent cultural stereotype of the evil hunchback.<sup>21</sup> Of the Crawford Lanciotto, the *Times* said, "Francesca's husband is a gnomelike monstrosity, who grovels at her feet in his amorous



moods and is a fiend in his pursuit of revenge" (June 1902). The *Times* commented about the d'Annunzio Lanciotto: "[The] crippled hunchback last night was savagely virile and bestially cunning" (Nov. 1902). In these plays, both of which derived from Boccaccio's retelling, the character's evil nature is constructed not only from physical appearance but from his actions. In these versions, far from resisting marriage to Francesca, Lanciotto actively deceives her by having Paolo serve as his proxy until the wedding night. Viewers who knew neither of these Dante-specific intertexts may nonetheless have encountered other texts featuring evil hunchbacks, the most famous of whom was probably Shakespeare's Richard III. The oft-performed melodrama, *Under Two Flags*, had a hunchbacked villain, Baroni. The hunchbacked Rigoletto, in an opera so popular that Biograph made a filmed version (*The Fools Revenge*, 1909), mistakenly murders his own daughter in a vengeful frenzy. These intertextual references to hunchbacks may have interacted with some of the film's signifying practices (e.g., Lanciotto's obviously deformed appearance and his limp) and resulted in a reading of the husband's revenge as brutal and unjustified murder.

But yet other texts portrayed hunchbacks in a favorable manner. In one of the most popular nineteenth century melodramas, *The Two Orphans*, the hunchbacked Pierre Frochard, the one good member of a corrupt family, serves as the blind heroine's protector. Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame, also offers chivalric protection to a woman. In fact, physical deformation often coincided with noble character, as in the many folk and fairy tale versions of the beauty and the beast legend first rendered in written form by the seventeenth century Frenchman, Charles Perrault. As Jack Zipes suggests, the popularity of this tale may stem from the fact that, like Francesca, "younger women of bourgeois and aristocratic circles were constantly being forced into marriages of convenience with elderly men, who were not always physically appealing or likeable" (34). Viewers familiar with these or other favorable portrayals of unattractive men may have been inclined to sympathize with Lanciotto and to expect a happy ending.

The privilege accorded star-crossed lovers in texts ranging



from "high art" to the popular, however, suggests an alternate reading centering on Paolo and Francesca. A *New York Times* review of the 1883 Barrett production specifically referenced this intertextual frame.

The fate of Paglo [sic] and Francesca is hke [sic] that of Launcelot and Guinevere, Heloise and Abelard, Romeo and Juliet — and popular interest in the world's celebrated and unfortunate lovers is as lasting as passion itself. A somewhat iconoclastic history has made it tolerably clear to us that Francesca had been married 10 years when she sinned and died with her lover (...). But the imagination of a great poet has created them as they are really and permanently to us — two ardent spirits sundered in the springtide of their youth, two beautiful and imperishable ideals.

The popularity of the tale among a female readership suggests that members of certain social formations indeed foregrounded a reading of the tale that privileged the tragic love of Paolo and Francesca. Women, and some men as well, produced a good many romantic poems on the subject, foregrounding love rather than punishment (LaPiana, 147-152). Julie K. Wetherill wrote "Francesca to Paolo" for *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1884:

I know the spring makes merry far and wide,  
And birds are building nests with songful cheer,  
In yon green world, lovely and love-denied;  
Lo! this is hell; but thou art with me here. (594)

The numerous paintings depicting the tale all center on Paola and Francesca, and show them embracing, either in life, or in death, or floating through eternity. For example, Rossetti's painting "Paolo and Francesca" depicts the lovers clasped in each other's arms in a medieval setting, and in Cabanel's "The Death of Paolo and Francesca" the dead Francesca lies on a couch, the dead Paolo on the floor beside her, his arm around her shoulder. In the famous, and often referenced, Doré illustration, the shrouded couple floats past Virgil and Dante.

A vast range of romantic literature may well have inflected readings of the Vitagraph film even for those not familiar with Francesca-specific intertexts. The heroes and heroines of countless melodramas struggled through a variety of vicissitudes to achieve union and happiness by the denouement, as did the characters in

the immensely popular dime novels of Laura Jean Libby.<sup>22</sup> Any and all of these romantic intertexts, both Francesca-specific and less directly related, may have served to activate certain of the Vitagraph film's signifiers in a manner that produced a reading foregrounding the lovers. Hence, the film could be seen as privileging the lovers through Francesca's shrinking in horror at her first sight of Lanciotto, and Paolo's collapsing in empathetic despair. The placing of the lovers in an elaborate exterior garden setting and the focusing on their interaction for three consecutive shots would also suit a romantic reading.

Other intertexts may have encouraged a moralistic condemnation of the illicit lovers and, thus, support for Lanciotto. Ouida (Louise de la Ramee, author of *Under Two Flags* and other romantic novels) asserted that Lanciotto had perfect justification for killing the immoral pair. "(...) we cannot but absolve him. [Lanciotto] did no wrong in the eyes of the church, nor would he in this age be condemned for what he did by any tribunal" (264). In a lecture on Dante given at the New York Public Library (Hamilton Grange Branch) as part of the Bureau of Lecture's series, Professor Christian Gauss of Princeton spoke of Francesca and Paolo as "those guilty of lust, blinded by passion, forever borne hither and thither by the wind in the starless sky." A writer in *The New Catholic World*, while professing to understand Dante's compassion for "a doom so piteous," still asserted: "The law is a good law, and those who break it (...) confess in the tormented air that they deserve to suffer" (Barry, 153). In fact, any adherent of the seventh commandment should not have condoned Paolo and Francesca's adulterous relationship.

Popular melodramas also had a high regard for this commandment and were rigidly puritanical in its application. Any melodramatic heroine unlucky enough to stray from the path of virtue into an adulterous relationship soon learned that the wages of sin are death. The most famous of these, the Lady Isobel in the perennial favorite *East Lynne*, left her husband for a philandering adventurer, but returned by play's end to a repentant expiration in her spouse's arms. Frequenters of the melodrama may thus have viewed Francesca's death as her just desert rather than as a piteous tragedy. Less moralistically inclined popular

venues reveled in recounting crimes of passion, wherein a wronged husband killed his wife and/or her lover as well as other instances of love-triangle deaths. The *National Enquirer* of its day, *The Police Gazette*, often found in saloons and barbershops, constantly ran stories of this type, typical of which were "Killed by Her Husband," "Shot Her Through the Head," and "Brennan's Fatal Love."<sup>23</sup> Devotees of this publication may have expected the Vitagraph film's narrative to resolve in the deaths of one or all of the principal characters, just as those familiar with the recent high society Thaw/White scandal may have expected Lanciotto to murder Paolo.

Some commentators on the tale of *Francesca da Rimini* suggested that infidelity, treachery, fratricide, and suicide were typical "Italian" behavior. Ouida took a particularly harsh view of Francesca. "He [Dante] perhaps knew that Francesca had been of that temper (one to this day frequent amongst Italian women) to which it seems preferable that the beloved one should suffer in a common doom of misfortune rather than escape to be happy elsewhere" (268). In addition to condemning Francesca, the author repeatedly advanced negative stereotypes of the Italian character. Speaking of the revelation of the lovers' liaison, she said: "(...) the usual informer and eavesdropper, who is more general in Italy, the land of spies, than elsewhere, carried the tale of their intimacy to Lanciotto (...)" (264). Edith Wharton also attributed the tragedy to Italian "racial traits," characterizing Lanciotto as "a stealthy, smiling assassin" (29). Period social surveys suggest that members of the "lower orders" shared Ouida and Wharton's antipathies. In New York City, German and Irish immigrants called Italians "dagos," believing that they were "spoiling the neighborhood" and given to cheating (Herzfeld, 13). Newspaper coverage of the Black Hand undoubtedly reinforced negative ethnic stereotypes of Italians. The film's title alone may have been sufficient to activate these anti-Italian intertexts and a viewer deploying this intertextual frame would perhaps have derived satisfaction from having prejudices confirmed, or have seen all the characters as equivalently immoral.

The approach that we have taken with *Francesca da Rimini* would permit us to continue to generate readings, were we so

inclined. As we have seen, various related texts — different versions of the story, published receptions of these versions and broader intertextual frames (hunchbacks, lovers, etc.) — may well have interacted with the film to produce a wide range of possible readings. But while the range may be wide, it is not unlimited. In other words, this approach does not lead to the dread interpretive anarchy feared by those who place their faith in textual determinants. Our evidence permits us to speculate that viewers in the turn-of-the-century United States may have read the Vitagraph film as a story about star-crossed lovers or duplicitous Italians — interpretations that are not randomly generated but rather historically grounded. While actual living subjects may, of course, have produced totally idiosyncratic readings of the film, our method does not concern itself with these, but rather looks at probable readings that may have been produced by members of specific social formations.

But while members of all social formations could have proliferated diverse readings predicated upon the intertexts to which they had been exposed, this ability served to reinforce cultural distinction only for those already favorably placed on the social/cultural hierarchy. While a white Anglo-Saxon university professor reading the original Dante and an immigrant laborer reading *The Police Gazette* may both have achieved similar narrative comprehension of Francesca da Rimini as a story about a love triangle, only the former could have used this reading to his social/cultural advantage. Moreover, the more Dante specific readings that the former could have produced would have been judged more nuanced and complex and hence better than the non Dante specific readings produced by the latter. This judgment, however, would not have been based upon any essential or inherent quality of the text but would rather have related to the existing cultural hierarchies that these "nuanced" and "complex" readings would have served to reproduce.

Having suggested how Vitagraph's *Francesca da Rimini* may have been received, let us conclude with the other question that began this paper: why might Vitagraph have made the film? While we have not discovered any absolutely convincing explanation, several possibilities suggest themselves. The film

may have resulted from the cultural aspirations and preoccupations of the co-founders of the Company, James Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith. Biographical information suggests that both men, characterized as nouveau-riche social climbers, wished their "high art" subjects to be congruent with the tastes of the social formation to which they aspired. The film may also have been part of Vitagraph's participation in the film industry's attempts to reposition itself from a marginalized entertainment associated with the "lower orders" to a respectable mass medium. But, as we have demonstrated, the story certainly provided an excuse to depict adultery, fratricide, treachery and suicide, all cloaked within the garb of ultra-respectability. Vitagraph may have perceived the film as a safe bet — acceptable to the medium's opponents and melodramatic enough for nickelodeon audiences, providing a practical lesson in textual polysemy.

Pennsylvania State University and  
The University of Pennsylvania

#### ENDNOTES

1 The sequence of the authors' names was determined by a coin toss. The authors collaborated to such an extent that they could not themselves distinguish their "individual" contributions to the article.

2 The accuracy of these perceptions is subject to debate among film scholars. The transitional nature of the years 1907-1913 makes it particularly difficult to discuss audience composition with any certainty. In addition, the haphazard survival and nature of empirical data coupled with the biased reports of a trade press intent upon improving the industry's image and of the industry's opponents intent upon suppression limits our reliance upon period evidence. Moreover, nickelodeons and their audiences differed widely from neighborhood to neighborhood, even within one city, rendering any overarching characterization suspect. Film scholars have sought, through the creative use of evidence to determine the location of nickelodeons and by implication, the composition of their audiences. Robert Allen, for example, extrapolating from such sources as *Trow's Business Directory of Greater New York* and fire insurance maps, argues that 1) as early as 1908, nickelodeons ceased to be located primarily in working class districts, and 2) by this time, middle class viewers formed an important component of the audience (Robert Allen,

"Motion Picture Exhibition in Manhattan, 1906-1912: Beyond the Nickelodeon," p. 162-175 in John Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Russell Merritt, discussing Boston nickelodeons, uses sources ranging from the *Boston City Directory* to the *Annual Reports of the Navy Department*, and reaches essentially the same conclusions as Allen ("Nickelodeon Theaters, 1905-1914: Building and Audience for the Movies," in Tino Balio (ed.), *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed., (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 83-102).

3 For a useful overview of current debates see Martin Allor's "Relocating the Site of the Audience," and the responses contained in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5 (1988) 217-254.

4 David Morley, *The "Nationwide" Audience* (London: The British Film Institute, 1980); Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1984); and Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985).

5 See Janet Staiger, "'The Handmaiden of Villainy': Methods and Problems in Studying the Historical Reception of a Film," *Wide Angle* 8:1 (1986) 19-27 and "Reception Studies: The Death of the Reader," in R. Barton Palmer (ed.), *The Cinematic Text: Methods and Approaches* (New York: AMS Press, 1989) 353-367. *Wide Angle* 8:1 is devoted to articles on the topic of reception.

6 See, for example, an issue of *The Velvet Light Trap* 25 (Spring 1990) on the conditions of reception. See also Janet Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking About the History and Theory of Film Advertising," *Cinema Journal* 29:3 (1990) 3-31.

7 See, for example, Ben Singer, "Female Power in the Serial-Queen Melodrama: The Etiology of An Anomaly," *Camera Obscura* 22 (1990) 90-129; Susan Ohmer, "Female Spectatorship and Women's Magazines: Hollywood, Good Housekeeping and World War II," *The Velvet Light Trap* 25 (Spring, 1990) 53-68; and Michael Renov, "Advertising/Photojournalism/Cinema: The Shifting Rhetoric of Forties Female Representation," *The Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11:1 (1989) 1-21.

8 See our "What is a Miracle? The Competing Discourses of the Natural and Supernatural in The Life of Moses," *RSSI (Recherches Sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry)* vol. 11, n° 2-3 (1991) 9-23; "'How to be a Stage Napoleon:' Vitagraph's Vision of History," *Persistence of Vision (forthcoming)*; and "How Many Times Shall Caesar Bleed in Sport: Shakespeare and the Cultural Debate About Moving Pictures," *Screen* 31:3 (Fall, 1990) 243-261. See also our *Reframing Culture: Intertextuality and Conditions of Production/Reception in Vitagraph's "High-Art" Moving Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

forthcoming).

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

10 We refer the reader to the work of Stanley Fish on readers and interpretive communities. See *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) and *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and The Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

11 Most extant prints do have fifteen shots, though we have located two additional shots in the Paper Print Collection at the Library of Congress that may or may not have been included in the original release print. Given the unstable nature of film stock in this period, surviving prints often vary significantly from release prints, further complicating textual analysis.

12 See, for example, John Fell, "Motive, Mischief and Melodrama: The State of Film Narrative in 1907," *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) 273-274.

13 Production information such as the number of prints struck and the number sold to the film exchanges would also, of course, form an important component of the conditions of reception. Yet no such information is available for the Vitagraph Company.

14 Album 452, The Burdick Collection, Department of Prints and Photographs, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

15 Louis Bolard More, *Wage-earners Budgets: A Study of Standards and Cost of Living In New York City* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1907) 135.

16 *Annual Report of the Supervisor of Lectures to the Board of Education* (New York: Department of Education, City of New York, 1907), 48.

17 *Annual Report of the Supervisor of Lectures to the Board of Education* (New York: Department of Education, City of New York, 1910), 185.

18 Edward Howard Griggs, *University Extension Lectures: Syllabus of Six Lectures on the Divine Comedy of Dante* (Philadelphia: American Society For The Extension of University Teaching, 1899) in Box 36, and *Fifth Annual Report of The Managing Director to the Corporation of the People's Institute*, 1902, p. 28, Box 1, People's Institute Records, Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, the New York Public Library.

19 John W. Frick, *New York's First Theatrical Center: The Rialto at Union*



*Square* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), 93.

20 Letter from George Boker to Richard Henry Stoddard.

21 *Francesca da Rimini*, by Gabriele d'Annunzio, tr. by Arthur Symons (New York: F.A. Stokes Company, 1902) and *Francesca da Rimini, a play in four acts*, by F. Marion Crawford (New York, London: The Macmillan Company, 1902).

22 On the latter, see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 189-190.

23 These stories all appear in the May 28, 1892 issue.

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