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PBS, Forgetting Its First Name

You'd think that if anyone can be said to "proudly present" that massive Victorian triple-decker "Middlemarch" it is George Eliot, aka Mary Ann Evans, who actually wrote all 800-plus pages. But times change, the species improves itself by the hour, and authorship becomes a somewhat more complicated matter than it once was.

Thus it is that last week's mail brought a flier from Random House announcing, "In a groundbreaking collaboration, THE MODERN LIBRARY and MASTERPIECE THEATRE proudly present one of the greatest works in all of English literature . . ."—this being, of course, "Middlemarch." Come April "Masterpiece Theatre" will begin a "brilliant adaptation" of the novel, to the accompaniment not merely of "an official companion volume published by the Modern Library" but also of "promotional spots," "single-copy counter display," "in-store poster," "point-of-sale merchandising," advertising in various print media and a "special suggested retail price" of \$15, reduced from \$19 list.

All of which most certainly would astonish Ms. Evans if only she were around to witness it; if she were she'd be on the "Today" show, blushing to the roots of her hair as she tried to fend off Katie Couric's bulldog questions about the affront to feminism implicit in taking a male pseudonym. But none of this hullabaloo will be in the least surprising to anyone familiar with the book industry and the Public Broadcasting Service in their current incarnations.

Of the former, enough has been said in this space to warrant a brief reprieve; suffice it to say that it's good to have the Modern Library back in business, even if its editions no longer can be called bargains, and that if it's hustling "Middlemarch," well, far worse has been done in the name of rank commerce. But as for PBS, the Random House tie-in is yet another instance of the relationship this "public" service has entered into with private business. That this is a mutually beneficial relationship seems to be the prevailing, if not universal, assumption; whether it is an appropriate one seems not to matter any longer.

Still, the question is worth raising, especially now that the leadership of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is about to change. In a long, informative story by Elizabeth Jensen that appeared a day after the Random House flier arrived, the Wall Street Journal reported that PBS's incoming president, Ervin Duggan, promises to "rebuild the case for public broadcasting," apparently in hopes of increasing financial contributions to PBS from the public treasury. Duggan, according to Jensen, believes that a dozen years of Reagan and Bush reduced PBS to "penury," forcing it to "take in laundry" in the form of business support.

If Duggan intends to press this view vigorously, we may well be in for an illuminating debate on the appropriate role of public broadcasting and, in turn, its appropriate sources of funding. Over the past couple of decades a system that began as "educational" TV has become a poor step-sibling of the commercial broadcasters, more interested in competing for ratings points than in fulfilling its ostensible mission. The question now is, or should be, whether PBS will be allowed to drift still farther along this road, with ever greater emphasis on audience-pleasers, or whether its commercial aspirations will be reined in.

This shouldn't be a debate about PBS's real or imagined ideological and/or political biases, though surely many will try to turn it into one. Probably it's true that inside the offices of PBS one would find a climate somewhat to the left of the country's prevailing mood; that's generally the case when two or more media types are gathered together. But there's little meaningful evidence of this in what actually manages to get onto the air; such bias as may be found tends to be toward uplift in general rather than uplift with any particular ideological slant.

Instead the debate should be over whether a system that depends, as PBS now does, on a mixture of public and commercial support is (a) capable of serving either master as each desires and (b) "public" in the received sense of the term. Right now PBS gets 13 percent of its \$1.39 billion annual budget from federal tax funds and 16 percent from state funds; almost the same total percentage is provided by individual subscribers and corporate underwriters, or sponsors, or whatever one cares to call them.

It's easy to blame Reagan and Bush for this, to raise the cry of right-wing philistinism as an explanation for PBS's turn toward private-sector support. But it's more complicated than that. Over the years PBS has had a handful of quasi-commercial semi-successes, from "Sesame Street" to "Masterpiece Theatre" to "The Civil War" to "Barney & Friends." Though these have made more money for vendors of trinkets than for PBS, they have encouraged it in the entirely fanciful notion that it can compete with private TV if only given the level playing field that ample commercial support allegedly would provide.

The result has been a lot of money spent on will-o'-the-wisps and a corruption of the original notions about what public, i.e., educational, television should be. This isn't to say that PBS has sold out—it and its member stations still produce many programs of merit and educational value—but that it has been mightily tempted to do so. This being the case, it hardly seems unfair to ask whether a "public" system that tries to compete with commercial broadcasting and that avidly solicits business underwriting should receive any further taxpayer support.

My view is that institutions involved in the expression and dissemination of ideas and knowledge can be public or private, but not both; throw private into the public mix and, inevitably, you compromise the latter in order to serve the former. But there is an absolutely legitimate place for a purely public broadcasting service that is concerned solely with education and has nothing to do with entertainment. Technological developments now make it more feasible than ever to bring educational broadcasting into private residences and to make it a central part of classroom instruction. Such broadcasting would return "public TV to its educational roots," as Jensen puts it, and would get it out of the uneasy chair it now occupies.

How this would sit with those who run public TV is of course another matter. But in a genuinely public system, the public interest rather than the competitive instincts and ambitions of programmers would be served. So far as public TV is concerned, the public interest is clear: education, pure and simple.