

Mary Pickford Meets the Mafia

Amy E. Borden

The Mafia, the mob, the Black Hand; these names periodically occur in catalog descriptions and publicity for a handful of nickelodeon and transitional-era American silent films that we may consider precursors to the American gangster cycle that began in earnest in the 1930s. The US origins of the Mafia-linked gangster film are traced to Wallace McCutcheon's *The Black Hand: The Story of a Recent Occurrence in the Italian Quarter of New York* (1906, American Mutoscope & Biograph). In this one-reeler, a butcher's daughter is lured and kidnapped by members of a criminal plot that is conspicuously marked by a nativist depiction of Italian immigrants as near-illiterate criminals. As seen in McCutcheon's revenge short, early Mafia-themed films are marked by a featured kidnap- or extortion-plot perpetrated by members of the Black Hand, a loosely organized immigrant-Italian underground criminal society. These films depict the police and conscientious citizens as cooperative partners with the relatively well-off victimized parents – often wealthy business owners or members of the middle class – whose children are unwittingly placed in peril by their parent's economic success. Set in Italian immigrant communities, the earliest films about the Italian Mafia purport to depict the danger this population faced from the criminal elements within. This creates a distinction between the hard-working residents of these neighborhoods and the louche element that threatens their assimilation to an American work ethic by drawing them back into an “Old World” mode of vengeance and criminality.

One can perhaps make the argument that it is in the 1930s that cinema's classic gangster tropes solidify, but these are still influenced by prior cycles. In the introduction to their anthology *Mob Culture*, Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnett, and Peter Stanfield critique an understanding of the gangster genre as it has codified around

Robert Warshow's analysis, criticizing its attempt to construct generic archetypes from a limited, 1930s-heavy, data set of films. They claim that Warshow's work, which they argue provides much of the basis for the genre analysis performed with gangster films, ignores the "production and consumption context[s]," including popular pre-1930s film cycles. Their work proposes a reconsideration of a canonical conception of genre criticism within film studies due to its basis in a select and limited number of films that are evaluated based on a few shared features of subject and structure. They argue against this approach by emphasizing how it "reifies a particular cycle of films that were closely connected to the particular socioeconomic content of the early-1930s" (2005, 2). The consequences of this is the effacement of other film cycles prior to this period as well as an erasure of the conditions that contributed to the characteristics of the gangster genre manifest in the 1930s. In effect, their work advocates for the importance of film cycles as more responsive registers of social and cultural change. Before the organized criminal undergrounds featured in Josef von Sternberg's 1927 classic *Underworld* and other Hollywood-produced gangster films of the late-1920s and 1930s, nickelodeon and transitional-era depictions of the underworld are less at home with Feathers and Bull and more likely to be featured amid small-time, storefront criminal gangs who inhabit a liminal space between New York's urban, Italian immigrant neighborhoods and the so-called Sicilian old country.

One such film is the Mary and Jack Pickford multi-reel drama *Poor Little Peppina* (1916, Famous Players-Lasky/Paramount, Sidney Olcott), in which Mary plays the titular Peppina and Jack plays Beppo, who both believe to be Peppina's brother. In fact, Peppina, *née* Lois, is the kidnapped child of the Torrens family, an affluent American couple who left Italy's Sicilian coast fifteen years ago, after their infant daughter was kidnapped from their home and presumed killed. Lois is very much alive, but she is unaware of her identity because she was raised as Peppina, the daughter of an Italian peasant family. Lois/Peppina's circulation between families marks the removal and transformation of a wealthy American child to that of an Italian peasant in a reversal of the assimilationist tendencies often seen in Black Hand-plotted short films such as McCutcheon's. Although there is nothing in that film that iconographically marks the butcher and his family as Italian immigrants, the fact that the film was staged and plotted using the well-reported and illustrated (March 1906) Miano child kidnapping as its model places its action within New York's Italian immigrant community, which Grieveson has shown was "widely regarded as presenting a racial and civic dissonance with American society" (2005, 37). As represented in early American film, the Black Hand and their chosen intracommunity victims communicate the danger and extent of this dissonance.

The first scenes in *Poor Little Peppina* emphasize the presence of the Mafia. The film's story borrows from what, by 1916, would be familiar Black-Hand themes and iconography: the kidnapping of a child, a criminal conspiracy, and the escape of the criminals from prison. In the version of the film that survives, its second title card introduces the audience to "Franzoli Soldo, a Mafia chief, under the guise of a butler..." (*Poor Little Peppina* Title Card, 1916). Performed by Antonio Maiori using

a silent-cinema acting style Giorgio Bertellini understands to “reveal a character’s national and racial identity,” Soldo is a stereotypical portrayal of Italianness that is all hot temper and abundant hand gestures (2010, 208). In addition to its intertitles and title cards, press descriptions also explicitly tie the film’s story and themes to the Mafia. Multiple reviews, such as this one published when the film opened, describe how the first scenes of the film turn on the presence of the Mafia.

The opening scenes show the incidents that occurred 15 years prior to the time Miss Pickford makes her appearance as Peppina. A wealthy American family by the name of Torrens, [sic] reside at their beautiful Italian villa. The family comprises Mr. and Mrs. Torrens and their daughter, Lois, a child about two years of age. The Torrens’ butler, an Italian and member of the Mafia, likes to sample the wine cellar of his employer, with the result that he is reported to the master by another of the servants. The butler is discharged and swears vengeance. (Hollywood Museum Collection)

Soldo avenges the loss of his position by murdering the informant who reported his theft. After being captured, he is tried and convicted of the murder. With “the aid of the Mafia,” embodied by his associate Villato, who is also, as a title card emphasizes, “a member of the Mafia,” Soldo makes a dramatic escape – is there any other kind during this era? His need for vengeance drives him back to the Torrens’ villa. Once there, he breaks in to steal their youngest child. Leaving the area by small boat, Soldo and Villato deliver Lois to Soldo’s relatives: Dominica, his wife Biana, and their son Beppo. The intertitle explains the terms of the gift: “Take this child and raise her as your own. If you tell anyone about her, you will answer to the Mafia” (*Poor Little Peppina* Title Cards, 1916). Afterward, Soldo escapes to New York’s Little Italy with Villato, where, in true Pickford fashion, seventeen years later they will again meet young Lois/Peppina. Only this time she will be disguised as a teenage boy to ensure a safe Atlantic crossing and her resettlement in New York’s Little Italy after she flees the Sicilian coast.

I’ve quoted the film’s reviews and intertitles at length to demonstrate how the Mafia is significantly and repeatedly referred to in the film’s story, in the intertitle and title card explanations and advancement of its plot, and in the publicity that surrounded its release. *Poor Little Peppina* does not simply use the basic conventions of a Black-Hand plot; it embeds those conventions within a more sophisticated narrative that focuses on the grown Peppina’s movement from her Italian home to New York’s Lower East Side, where she will re-encounter Soldo and Villato on her way to unknowingly reuniting with her birth family. This chapter asks, then, what happens when Mary Pickford meets the Mafia? Bearing in mind Pickford’s enormous celebrity at the time of the film’s release, I will consider how her star image interacts with Black-Hand cycle conventions in the film’s story and its publicity. How do the burgeoning conventions of Mafia-themed films bend or reinforce themselves when cast alongside Pickford? To answer this question, I build on Grieveson’s work about the ethnic and cultural immigration contexts found in silent era gangster films. He embeds Black-Hand- and Mafia-themed films in a cultural and social

discourse about urban criminality that positioned Italian immigrants as racialized others. Grieveson sees how “accounts of Black-Hand ... gangs connected criminality directly to immigration and racial difference and articulated a growing sense of organized crime in cities shadowing civil society” (2005, 21). I wish to isolate Black-Hand- and Mafia-themed films to understand how their depiction of race and immigration is affected by an association with Mary Pickford. *Poor Little Peppina* – a film that required her to both outwit the Mafia and cut off her famous curls – features a mash-up of successful American silent film themes which has the effect of both differentiating the film as a Mary Pickford feature and allowing it to chase a growing audience for racial melodramas that Bertellini has argued uses the liminal space of the tenement to claim “liberty and self-determination” for racialized Italian women denied such gains back home. For Bertellini, the result of gaining such liberty is the ability to reinvent oneself; to become, as he quotes from the title of the 1918 film starring George Beban, the famous portrayer of Italian-American immigrants: *One More American* (2010, 234).

Peppina and its cultural and social discourse creates a film that in practice Americanizes depictions of Italian women by suggesting that it is an identity that may be adopted and shed at will. What better way to Americanize than to be portrayed by Pickford, an actress who, although Canadian by birth, came to personify an all-American sense of self-transformation, savvy capitalism, and patriotism? By highlighting the publicity that surrounded Pickford prior to *Poor Little Peppina*'s release as well as the publicity about the film distributed and prompted by Famous Players, this chapter will show how Pickford as Peppina harnesses rhetoric about silent era Black-Hand and Mafia tropes to indirectly position immigrant-Italian women as extensions of Pickford's All-American persona. Part of the work of this chapter is to examine how Pickford's film trades on the popular myth of the Black Hand and draws from its silent era cycle conventions while incorporating them into a more complex narrative concerning the Mafia.

After 1908, Black-Hand films were released at least yearly in the United States until the mid-1920s. For a complete list, see the section “Filmography” at the end of this chapter. While not ubiquitous enough to be considered a genre – film cycles are “small, nuanced groupings of films that are not transhistorical and often operate within one or two seasons” – cinematic Black-Hand- and Italian Mafia-themed films were prompted by popular mass-media reports of Black-Hand kidnappings preceding and during the late-nickelodeon and transitional eras (Grieveson 2005, 3–4). The two terms are used interchangeably in descriptions of these films, although Black Hand is used much more often as this was the term adopted and frequently used by the popular press. *Poor Little Peppina* is infrequently highlighted in studies of silent cinema's representations of gangsters and Mafia members. The fact that the film is a Pickford vehicle, or that it is part of the Black-Hand cycle that had reached its popular peak in the years after the infamous March 1909 Josef Petrosino assassination, may explain why *Peppina* has not been closely examined under the assumption that it is one of the same that came before, albeit one starring the most popular screen performer of the time.

Nationwide press characterizing the Mafia as a Sicilian criminal phenomenon accelerated after the 1890 killing of New Orleans police chief David Hennessy, who had been investigating crimes involving Italian immigrants (Bertellini, 186). In the decades following, widespread reports of Southern Italian criminal syndicates captured the nation's imagination. Beginning with a November 1909 *Variety* ad, the term Mafia appears in motion picture magazines and entertainment publications to characterize Italian immigrant performers and to describe what had previously been and continued to be identified as Black-Hand storylines. The first review I found to use the term is for a stage show that features "a 'wop' song *King of the Mafia*" at Poli's in Hartford, Connecticut. The same issue includes a capsule review that describes a "Mafia gentleman" appearing at the Haymarket in Chicago. The review uses the terms Mafia and Black Hand interchangeably. Concurrent to the re-introduction of the term Mafia, most likely a result of the nationwide attention captured by the Petrosino assassination after his announced intention to break the New York arm of the Sicilian Mafia, New York-based producers released multiple one and two reel films that explicitly refer to or feature depictions of the Black Hand. These followed and were modeled on depictions of the group in the popular press as an American iteration of the Sicilian Mafia and the Neapolitan *Camorra*. Bertellini ascribes the adoption of the term "Black Hand (*La mano nera*)" to a fall 1903 *New York Herald* article's use of the term to describe crimes reportedly committed by gangs of Italian immigrants. Between 1903 and 1908, press headlines across the country adopted the term Black Hand, replacing "earlier mentions of the Mafia and *Camorra*" (187). Predating the group's cinematic appearance, one of the first widely reported New York Black Hand trials occurred in September 1903. Wealthy dock contractor Nicole Capiellais was blackmailed by five so-called agents of the Black Hand. The writer of the story published about the case in New York's *Evening World* described the court-room proceedings of the blackmail trial by emphasizing how the "Black Hand agents glared viciously" at a witness as the man "sneered" back at the five men. The article concludes with a memorable history lesson and description of the mayhem caused by the Mafia, which in this case is differentiated from the Black Hand.

'The Society of the Bad Blood,' known also under the generic name of Mafia, [which] is not unknown in this country, nor in New York, where it has perpetrated many murders; but this is the first time that the 'Black Hand' has been seen here. The latter has but one purpose—extortion. The alternative is death 'The Order of the Black Hand' was first heard of in 1825 in Naples, where it was formed among the prisoners then in the castle of the famous Neapolitan capital. The symbol and the name of the order was that of Piccioto di Sgarro, the high executioner of the *Camorra*, who was dreaded, and the mere mention of whose name made people cross themselves and little children cry.

The New York press takes cold pleasure in describing the crimes and terror purportedly caused by "an arm of the 'Order of the Black Hand'" as it "stretched across the sea to strike" from "out of Calabria" (*Evening World* 1903, 5). In this story, we find what will become the hallmarks of cinematic Black-Hand tales: Southern Italian

criminals, an Italian immigrant blackmailed, the threatening of American institutions, and a police capture maintaining that law and order has been restored, at least for the moment.

Films about the Black Hand only increased after Petrosino's assassination. After 1909, the entertainment press interchangeably used the terms Mafia and Black Hand. The latter often, but not exclusively, referred to kidnap and blackmail plots – often with a bomb threat. The former referred to Italian immigrant criminal conspiracies of all types, but was also most prevalent as a modifier or synonym for Black Hand. In July 1908, two years after McCutcheon's short, the Kleine Optical Co. imported and distributed a large package of French-produced fiction titles including Urban-Eclipse's production *The Organ-Grinder's Daughter*. The encapsulation of the film was published by *Moving Picture World* in August of the same year. It describes an involved plot that includes several elements that will also appear in later films in the Black-Hand cycle. These include a kidnapped child, a ransom note, and the father's profession as an organ-grinder, which reoccurs later in the cycle in *The Organ Grinder* (1912, Kalem) and *The Organ Grinder's Ward* (Oct. 1912, Reliance). It's unlikely this film was chosen deliberately for its subject matter. It was part of a package deal, yet it is the second of a cycle of films that will feature Black-Hand or Mafia-themes.

Throughout this period, popular press reports increasingly dramatized the extortion, kidnappings, and bombings assigned to the Black Hand with elaborate graphic representations in newspapers and national magazines. Many of these stories concern Lieutenant Petrosino, the then head of the New York Police Department unit devoted to investigating crime in the Italian community.¹ In an effort to fight both perceived and actual Mafia and Black-Hand intrusion into New York's immigrant neighborhoods, New York City Police Commissioner Theodore Bingham sent Petrosino, who himself had immigrated from Padula, to Palermo to coordinate a two-sided campaign against the Palermo Mafia and its American counterpart. While the visit was supposed to be a secret, it was all over the New York papers. *The Sun* published the first story on February 20th, after which more papers followed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Petrosino was shot dead upon arrival.² Films about the Black Hand only increased after his assassination.

In January 1909, nickelodeons could book the Great Northern Film Company's release of its 720-foot *Mafia*. That same month, Kalem, a production company founded by, among others, George Kleine of the Kleine Optical Co., which distributed *The Organ-Grinder's Daughter*, released *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau*, the fourth film to explicitly feature the Black Hand. In December 1909, Biograph released *An Awful Moment*, which was described in exhibitor magazine *The Nickelodeon* as a "drama based upon the operations of the Black Hand." While an incomplete version of the film survives, this description trades on an association with Black-Hand plots that is unclear from its published description. *An Awful Moment* is a thriller in which an unnamed woman avenges her male companion's jail sentence by staging a rather spectacular Christmas morning murder attempt on the sentencing judge's wife. With the judge and his wife's child asleep in the background,

the avenging woman breaks into the parlor and sets a shotgun found wrapped under the family Christmas tree to fire at the judge's wife, who had already been incapacitated by the woman. When the judge enters the room, interrupting the murder plot, he and the woman fight until she is subdued.

Both the male and female criminals in *An Awful Moment* are performed as an emphatically gesticulating duo whose costumes racialize each as so-called authentic, poor, Southern-European immigrants. Joanne Ruvoli, Anne Friedberg, and others have demonstrated how between 1908 and 1913, D.W. Griffith shot a cycle of single-reel films for Biograph in which "twisted handlebar mustaches, wide-brimmed peasant hats, embroidered skirts, straw-bottomed bottles of wine, stiletto knives, crucifixes, and portraits of St. Anthony ... proliferate and mark Sicilian and Italian ethnicity" (Ruvoli 2009, 59). The above-described stereotypical traits of Italian immigrants and references to a Sicilian or Italian Mafia in the context of Italian representation are influenced by both popular-press accounts that draw from published eugenic studies and immigration reports that purport to explain the behavior of "Sicilians as 'excitable, superstitious, and revengeful'" (qtd. in Ruth 1996, 13).³ Illustrating this, the immigrant woman in *An Awful Moment* is armed with a dagger, a common Black-Hand prop, when she breaks into the judge's home. The use of the term Black Hand to describe this film shows us that the presence of vengeance, a dagger, and so-called authentic immigrant depictions are all that is needed for the public to see the workings of the Black Hand. By the end of the 1909 season, the cycle's conventions were so well known from popular-press descriptions of similar stories that film catalogs, exhibitor organs, and advertisements only need describe a film as having a "Black-Hand plot" for exhibitors and audiences to know what to expect of the narrative. *The Organ Grinder* (1912, Kalem), for example, is described in *The Nickelodeon* as "a drama based upon the operations of the Black Hand and presenting ingenious as well as thrilling situations."

These stories ranged in length from one-reel, fifteen-minute films to what we would now consider feature length. Regardless of length, many of these were advertised and sold as features. When we consider the sheer number of films produced annually during the silent era, a single film a year within a cycle or a concentration of sixteen annually, as we see in the Black-Hand cycle's highpoint year of 1914, is not necessarily significant. However, Black-Hand-themed films and their motifs were popular enough as a stand-alone cycle during the nickelodeon era for their conventions to appear as familiar elements within other plots. As much as Black-Hand stories were the central attraction of films that dramatized Italian immigrant assimilation, they were also used as part of both comedic and dramatic mistaken-identity plots, kidnapping stories, farces, and as minor plot devices used to tie urban criminality back to the racialized Italian immigrant. In his compilation of silent-era American film cycles, Larry Langman finds that "by the 1920s, the Black Hand films all but disappeared from the American screen, replaced by general crime films" (1998, 76). Rather than "replaced," we are better served by thinking of this cycle as either one which was absorbed into other conventions or one which had its conventions dispersed enough that they began to be insertable plot and style

points able to trade on audience familiarity: insert extortion note marked by a dagger here or a group of mustachioed men at a bar there.

Even as the cycle was producing multiple, similarly dramatized features a year, there were a range of actions and elements of *mise-en-scène* that indicated a Black-Hand film. Starting with, perhaps, the most obvious example, the image of a black hand was often accompanied by drawn images of daggers and skulls and crossbones alongside misspelled English-language words to communicate the criminal's inferior intellectual abilities. A by-product of this effect is that the cycle's *mise-en-scène* often duplicates symbols and representations as a visual shorthand to the audience. It is the stylized nature of these elements that makes them so memorable and allows them to play as well in the dramatic crime films, which were the most-produced subjects of the cycle, as in comedies. Comedies begin including Black-Hand elements in 1909 with the release of *Trailing the Black Hand* produced by the French company Lux and imported by New York's Atlas distribution company. In fact, a great many of the Black-Hand comedies were imported from France. *The Moving Picture World* from March 1912 includes what must be the best title of the cycle: *A Midget Sherlock Holmes* (Mar. 1912, Pathé), in which a young boy adopts a bearded disguise to outwit the Black Hand's extortion threat.

In 1911, *Mutt and Jeff and the Black Hand* was released by Nestor as part of the popular Mutt and Jeff series of animated films. Complete with stiletto knives, a note, and extortion threat, the film uses an absurd mistaken-identity plot. The Black Handers briefly confuse Mutt and Jeff for Mariangelo and Francesca Pinozzi, fruit cart owners they have threatened, who have fled to safety fearing for their lives. The October 7, 1911 issue of *The Moving Picture News* describes how Mutt and Jeff are conscripted into the gang after the initial confusion "with the aid of numerous stilletos acting as accelerators." And then, of course, there is the decision to blow up the police station, "because the police have been overactive of late," leading to Jeff's exoneration when the police chief recognizes his old friend. Like the earlier and more dramatic Black-Hand films, we see a resolution restoring law and order – even if Mutt has been left to languish in a dungeon-like cell – as well as the elements of *mise-en-scène*, such as the note and the knives, that iconographically mark the cycle. When the Thanouser Company released *The Amateur Detectives* in December 1914, comedic uses of Black-Hand elements had become unremarkable. In the same month, *Moving Picture World* described the film as "another one of the familiar black hand comedies in which the girl and hero alarm the household with mystical symbols and then turn detectives and earn the reward."

Mafia-themed films developed during the transitional era (1908–1917) as the themes and traits of the Black-Hand cycle were incorporated into more complex plots. We can see this in the five-reel *Children of the Night* (1921), in which a shipping clerk's dream-world alter ego brushes up against a secret criminal society styled after the Black Hand. After approximately 1916, most references to the Black Hand or the Mafia are embedded in plots about bootlegging or general urban criminality. This makes sense because before American film tropes coalesced into recognizable narrative-based genres during the classical era, film narratives liberally borrowed

conventions, character depictions, and tropes from one another, as we've seen in the way Black-Hand elements appear in a range of plots. Besides seeing the consolidation of the companies that would form the major and minor studios of the 1920s, the years between 1908 and 1917 also saw American filmmaking undergo a fundamental transformation from an attractions-based mode of address, as seen in popular genres such as the chase and trick films, in which effects were elevated above plot and character, to a form described by film historian André Gaudreault as one featuring narrative integration. In his well-known essay about the cinema of attractions, Tom Gunning explains that this mode of address constructs its spectator by "making use of both fictional and nonfictional attractions, its energy moves toward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative" (1990, 59). As part of this change, the Black Hand is rarely the narrative focus as stories became more involved along with the transition to lengthier films. Instead, it is often seen in flashbacks or relegated to subplots often disconnected from an overt connection to Italian immigration.

While *Poor Little Peppina* is driven by its version of a Black-Hand plot, it is first and foremost a Mary Pickford vehicle. When the film was released on March 2, 1916, Pickford was the most famous actress in the United States, if not the world. After making nine features over the course of two seasons, she was nicknamed America's Sweetheart in 1914 by powerful theater owner David Grauman – father to Sid, who famously established Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles. The following year, renowned theater impresario David Belasco, for whom Pickford worked before she began her transition to motion pictures in 1909, named her the Queen of the Movies in an essay published in *Photoplay*. Two years after Grauman reportedly nicknamed her, Famous Players began advertising Pickford's pictures with ad copy that described her as "America's Sweetheart." Introducing another origin story for Pickford's moniker, Eileen Whitfield includes Famous Players' B. P. Schulberg's explanation for the phrase in her biography of the icon. Schulberg wrote publicity and scenarios for the company, including the popular earlier Pickford feature *Tess of the Storm Country* (1914). Whitfield describes how Schulberg "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." Whitfield makes the point that Schulberg's memory of the origin of the nickname shows that "Pickford's image was created by the public, and augmented by publicity" (1997, 133). The public took to the name and adopted it over the course of Pickford's career, adapting it to be Our Mary and continuing to augment the publicity machine of Zuckor's young studio.

Beloved as Little Mary, Our Mary, and America's Sweetheart on screen, Pickford signed a contract renegotiation with Adolph Zukor to form the Famous Players-Mary Pickford Company Inc weeks prior to *Peppina's* release. She was the first star of her time to own one half of her own production company, even if she was described as a "dainty picture favorite" in her adoring press (Hollywood Museum Collection). A review of the film's New York's Broadway theater debut reported that

in addition to the formation of the new corporation, “*Poor Little Peppina*, by Kate Jordan ... is the first seven-reel release in which [Pickford] has appeared.” In 1916, a seven-reel film marked significant investment on the part of both production and distribution companies. Film historian Michael Quinn explains that during the later American transitional era, feature films – those more than two reels in length and advertised as an individual product – had become commonplace enough that distributors and producers sought to differentiate their features by promoting each film’s uniqueness (2001, 38). For *Peppina*, this included its seven-reel preliminary release before a more widely distributed five-reel version. In the months leading up to its release, Famous Players placed multiple ads in *Motion Picture World* announcing its seven-reel release and urging exhibitors to contact their exchanges early to secure a print for extended bookings, even though the company had reportedly “supplied all exchanges with additional prints.” The LaSalle Theater in Chicago booked the film for a three-week run, which was at that point its longest booking for a Famous Players’ title. Even considering the aggrandizing nature of marketing, the film was clearly well-publicized and a hit. It played well into the fall season.

The reappearance of a Black-Hand plot and the film’s primary focus on Pickford rather than on Saldo and Villato could account for *Poor Little Peppina*’s elision in a canon of the cinematic Mafia. Yet, Pickford’s on-screen presence is also not written about very much in critical silent film scholarship. Whitfield’s biography, *The Woman Who Made Hollywood*, and Kevin Brownlow’s 1999 pictorial reassessment of Pickford, created from former Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences photography curator Robert Cushman’s extensive collection of Pickford papers and ephemera, are the two most recent and extensive works on Pickford. Yes, her massive popularity is noted in histories of the American silent era, as is her role managing her own incredibly successful career, which includes being one of the four founders of United Artists in 1919 along with D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and Pickford’s then-husband Douglas Fairbanks. (Chaplin famously nicknamed her “Bank of America’s Sweetheart,” a play on words that she hated.) However, her film roles and on-screen personas are rarely considered. Gaylyn Studlar is the exception to this lack of attention. She argues that Pickford personified ideals of Victorian femininity in a nostalgic appeal to adult men raised during that era. Studlar reads Pickford as an embodiment of a “child-woman” (2002, 350).

She represented a dangerously attractive female whose masquerade of childishness appealed to adult men raised in the late Victorian period. Those men might find her enticing innocence a comforting alternative to the models of sexual subjectivity offered by the flapper and the new woman. On the other hand, Pickford’s many child-woman heroines also could serve an identificatory function for women and girls who might read her as a comforting ‘asexual’ figure of freedom whose youth released her from the demands—including the sexual demands—of adult femininity. (2002, 361)

The repetition of her performance as a child, even after she aged past what we would now see as believable, alongside her kinetic and melodramatic acting style creates a

body of incredibly popular films. These were often adapted from popular late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century literary works about children. Studlar argues that during Pickford's transition to features, "her screen persona grew even younger, until she was for all intents and purposes, a child impersonator in such films as *The Foundling* (1916), *The Poor Little Rich Girl* (1917), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1917), and 1917's *A Little Princess*" (2002, 351). While she doesn't include Peppina among these films and performances, that may be because as Peppina Pickford is cast as a late adolescent of marrying age – she flees Italy to avoid an arranged marriage – so she is not playing a juvenile as young as her characters in those features. However, her adoption of various guises in the film allows her to play younger than herself and her character for much of the film.

At seven reels, *Peppina* was the longest film Pickford had appeared in at that point in her career. As such, it provided her fans with an unprecedented opportunity to watch their favorite actress in what was repeatedly advertised as her "first Italian characterization," which the tagline for the film emphasized in its description of Pickford "in an unusual characterization" as Peppina. The film's advertising, and the reviews and articles that followed included an emphasis on the film as an opportunity to experience a form of racial voyeurism. It reportedly broke box office records on its opening day at the Broadway Theater, and the police were called to manage the crowds. The *Motion Picture World* review of the film in its March 11, 1916 issue describes it as "an artistic incident of immense importance," and the "greatest of Mary Pickford's efforts." The film's story adapts the Black-Hand kidnapping plot to endanger Pickford, inciting her to repeatedly disguise herself in what were, by this point in her career, relatively familiar characterizations. In 1916, Pickford was most identified with her rags-to-riches portrayals in which she often depicted a "penniless waif ... claimed by wealthy, far away parents" (Whitfield 1997, 151). Her ability to play female adolescents, even when disguised, as she often was, as a boy, and her public's desire to see such roles, contributed to her massive popularity with fans and critics alike. Whitfield understands Pickford's fame in this period to be fueled by the public's "passion for the existence of 'Little Mary,' a creature of exquisite sensibilities," thereby arguing for how Pickford's persona transcends her on-screen performances. Reviews for her first Famous Players' hit, *Hearts Adrift* (1914), included poems and rapturous pronouncements. This one, published in the *New York Review*, is written as if Mary herself were commenting on her screen persona: "I move, like, a Fairy of Childhood's Wonderland, across the white screen of the Universe. The very azure skies are not too far reaching for my silent dream ... I am the wistful, butterfly-like, elusive quality of supreme Innocence as I peer out at you, night following night, with my big, round, tender eyes" (Whitfield 1997, 127).

In May 1918, *Motion Picture News* describes how "the 'typical' Pickford picture shows her in rags and curls, in situations both humorous and dramatic." Written two years after *Peppina* was released, this description easily applies to the film and draws attention to the way its coverage in the press emphasized its inclusion of Pickford's "unusual" and "novel characterizations." During the film, she works in a Sicilian vineyard as Peppina, is a stowaway disguised as a boy, a bootblack, an employee of

an opium den, a messenger boy, and, “finally, the restored millionaire’s daughter who comes into her own,” a point *Motion Picture World* makes in its capsule summation published in February 1916. The multiple personas Pickford adopts are not unusual for a Pickford film. Her appeal lay in the way she could inhabit multiple identities in the course of a story while always staying true to the upward arc of prosperity and fairness that marked the egalitarian, democratic fantasy of her films. Consider *Peppina*: the film begins by establishing Peppina as Lois; immediately the performance of Italianness is filtered through the knowledge that Peppina is Lois is Mary Pickford, who personifies a form of American film stardom. The “liberty and self-determination” Bertellini assigns to racial melodramas may be equally applied to many of Pickford films. These include films in which she is explicitly cast in a racial melodrama, as in *Madam Butterfly* (1915, Famous Players), and her more common characterization as a strongly drawn, confident adolescent who was often on her own. In this mode, a Pickford character was often disguised as an adolescent boy to gain access to forbidden places or to escape danger – she both appeared in drag as Little Lord Fauntleroy and as her own mother in the 1921 film – or as an urchin soon to discover a prosperous family.

A letter to the editor in the November 1916 issue of *Motion Picture Magazine* testifies how Pickford’s “gold en-curled, tiny ‘Little Mary’” appearance on screen and in fan magazines does not indicate a lack of versatility. “Who could forget,” the writer points out, “her stolid Indian stoicism in *Little Pal*? Her mute, repressed pathos in *Madame Butterfly*? Her excitable, gestureful [sic], Italianness in *Peppina*?” Surely, we can’t escape the obviousness of these as examples of films in which crude racializations are realized. What I am interested in here is how Pickford’s persona allows for her to play racialized roles. Bertellini briefly writes about Pickford’s *Poor Little Peppina* performance to highlight how it and the film perpetuate stereotypical depictions of Italy and Italians during the silent era. Certainly, her performance as Peppina is marked by a more than liberal use of hand gestures and costuming that immediately contextualizes her as an Italian peasant in the first scenes in which we see her. This quickly communicates her status and her character via her dress and actions. Pickford is introduced with a title and credit at the nine-minute mark that advances the story by over ten years: “Years have gone past. Unaware of her American parentage, Lois has grown up as Peppina.” Dressed in a long, patterned, cotton skirt, her hair tied back – framed at mid-ground in a wide, mid-shot that irises in and out – she is washing clothes in a rural stream. At this point in the Black-Hand cycle, and considering the numerous depictions of Italian immigrants and nationals during Griffith’s Biograph heyday, Pickford has a well-marked blueprint for her performance. Used also by Maiori as Soldo, this style allows Pickford to quickly communicate that Peppina is as Italian as her wider “adopted” family, privileging her cultural upbringing over her birthplace and heredity.

These descriptions, as well as those used for the Black-Hand cycle, should be understood within the context of the influx of European immigration into the Lower East Side of New York City. *Poor Little Peppina* is no exception to this and, in fact, traded on the popular-press reader’s interest in New York tenements and the

perceived criminality of an Italian underground to market the film. Numerous advertisements ran before the film opened that were aimed at fans and exhibitors alike. As part of the film's publicity, *Motion Picture Magazine* published "Little Mary in Little Italy" in October 1916, six months after the film opened.

At last, through crooked streets, Mary Pickford and her friends came along to the abode of Giuseppe and Maria. The door being so low they had to stoop when they entered the room, which Giuseppe proudly called their 'parlor.' It was almost a cubby-hole, but neat and clean as wax. A home-made [sic] rag carpet covered the floor, and while the walls were decorated with large crayon portraits in gilt frames of Giuseppe's noble ancestry, it was simple, cool and inviting. 'Where is Maria?' asked Mary Pickford of Giuseppe, who watched with pride as his guests glanced around and praised the comfort and cleanliness. 'Maka da spaghetti,' he replied seriously; 'da verra best in da contree.'"

The article mentions how some of Mary's female costars wouldn't go to Giuseppe's home in Little Italy for fear of microbes. But not Mary: "I knew I would learn and enjoy much because of this little adventure." And indeed, she did. The final paragraph of the story explains, "Mary Pickford tells that Maria has given her the recipe for making spaghetti. Little Mary says that when someday she had figured out the strange hieroglyphics she is going to publish it for housewives to try. Mary Pickford's own confession is that she cooks only the simplest things, which will not permit her to be the one to experiment" (Bastedo, 132). The reference to the "strange hieroglyphics" in which Maria has written her recipe recalls the Black-Hand's use of pictographs. More directly, it also builds from previous reports and on-screen inclusions of misspelled notes as part of the Black-Hand blackmail procedure. Certainly, Maria was not a member of the Black Hand. Rather, we can see here how a trait from the cycle, which had been fueled by real-life occurrences, is now being used in a likely press-department-created account of Little Mary's visit to New York's tenements.

Pickford's confession positions her outside of domestic spaces, perfectly fitting her star image and her dominant on-screen portrayals, in which she spent more time in rags than gowns. It disrupts any suggestion that Pickford's image included homemaker. In the claim to someday publish the recipe, Little Mary is asserted as the conduit between Maria, with her strange language, and the housewives of America. One can read this as an instance of cultural appropriation not unlike how the exaggerated performance style employed by Pickford during this era compressed and amplified aspects of Italian cultural life. This visit and her portrayal of Peppina as a young, nearly archetypal, yet, "Italian" Mary Pickford, depicts a process of Americanization that may address her audiences as a form of aspirational assimilation. A March 1916 illustrated photoplay story in *Motion Picture Magazine*, which often adapted film stories into short, magazine drama, features this description of Olcott and Jordan's *Poor Little Peppina*: a "pathetic, touching story of a rich girl who becomes a waif of the slums, featuring Mary Pickford." The feature is described in

the table of contents along with a making-of article about Theda Bera's *The Serpent*, and a photoplay story of an American heiress whose heart turns to stone in *Stronger Than Woman's Will*. A majority of the adapted film stories feature descriptions that highlight the adventures of the wealthy and aristocratic. Pickford's film offers viewers the pleasure of a slumming masquerade built on an American foundation. Her performance as Peppina embodies Bertellini's analysis that "for Italians assimilation was depicted as a challenging, but not impossible, process of moral domestication and adjustment that eventually transformed their class status and even their appearances" (2010, 203). This is a perfect description of what Pickford essentially does in the film.

At this point, we know the plot of *Poor Little Peppina*. So, how does Pickford as Peppina assimilate through moral domestication? Peppina flees her Italian home for New York to escape her betrothal to the village Padrone. Bernardo is a serial harasser who has negotiated for her hand in marriage by using his "land and money" to convince her father to agree to the union. The exchanges between the Padrone and Mary allow her to perform a version of her spirited, adolescent woman within a context that also highlights the limited agency granted Italian women in Italy. We know Mary/Lois to be disguised as Peppina, even if she herself does not. And with this knowledge the audience is given an American foundation to the Italian performance. The significant shift in class status this foundation represents and her subsequent appearance as a wealthy, young American is prompted when, with the help of Beppo, Peppina disguises herself as an adolescent boy to stowaway on an Atlantic crossing. While on the ship, an American, Hugh, finds the disguised Peppina and, taking pity on the "lad," pays his passage in steerage. There is a complicated connection between Peppina and Hugh, whose sister, an Italian countess by marriage who lived near Peppina's village, had previously taught the girl to speak English. She gave her money to be used for her flight from home as well as a card identifying her brother as a possible help in America, if Peppina ever found herself there. The card itself is important – a close-up of it allows the audience to learn her brother's name: Hugh Carroll. The film devotes an entire scene to Mary discovering she has lost it on her way to Naples to depart for New York. By meeting Hugh, Peppina returns to the family of her American benefactor and the class of her birth.

Parallel editing links Peppina's flight and what will greet her when she arrives in New York. Saldo and Villato have recently written Peppina's Italian parents to send her west so they may collect a reward for Lois Torrens' return to her parents. Borrowing an image from the Black-Hand cycle, Beppo replies for his illiterate parents in a note written in rough, standard English. It is notable that the letter sent from Saldo is clearly written in standard English. The mark of literacy is granted to men now residing and prospering in modern New York. This characterization continues a trend that is also present in both *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau* and *The Adventures of Lieutenant Petrosino* (1916). Each depicts a "splitting of the Italian community into two morally different groups" (Bertellini 2010, 195). For instance, in *The Black Hand* (1906), we see the criminals intoxicated in their hideout, but we only see the butcher and his wife in his place of business. Bertellini also finds this

dynamic in the cycle's later films: "Like several early American films about Italians, *The Adventures of Lieutenant Petrosino* manages to oppose two morally incompatible, but superficially fluid and interchangeable, models of Italianness. Petrosino may easily dress up as a shady Sicilian Mafioso, but the masquerade will not corrupt his moral character" (202). We see similar character traits and plot points in *Poor Little Peppina*: Saldo is dismissed and avenges himself because he was found drunk on the Torrens' wine; Beppo and Peppina's parents, although related to Saldo, are threatened with violence if they refuse to take in the child.

The men receive the family's reply that Peppina has run away. A short scene later Peppina is robbed by a stoker and brought to the now mustachioed Saldo and Vellato's Little Italy bar – a front for their counterfeit money operation. After this coincidental reunion with her kidnappers, she is pressured to work for the pair until she can escape their cruelty. The remainder of the film turns on the men's failure to both realize she is in drag in her male, adolescent disguise and that she is the very same young woman they are so desperate to locate. In the midsection of the film, Pickford performs several more scenes among street children, as she did with steerage passengers while in disguise on the liner. This adds another one of her usual characterizations to this film built on the "unusual characterization" tagline. In her journey back to her parents, Lois/Peppina adopts other short-term jobs including as a messenger boy, a job during which she is arrested, her disguise is discovered, and she's sent to The Children's Society, where a title informs us "they'll change her clothes," reintroducing her to the audience as a young, American woman and highlighting the pleasure of disguise her drag performance afforded. Before that change occurs, however, Peppina tells the police about Saldo and Vellato's Lower-East side criminal enterprise. This prompts a raid that includes an abbreviated chase scene after which Vellato confesses to the Torrens' kidnapping fifteen years prior. The opening of the film's conclusion begins with a policeman's exclamation: "Why Chief! That's the Torrens' child."

The assimilation as Americanization the film presents echoes the way the Black-Hand cycle initially depicted a class division within the Italian immigrant community. Rather than Lt. Petrosino occupying domestic spaces that communicate his middle-class status, Pickford embodies the dynamic of the split of the Italian community within her Americanized star body's ability to contain and display multiple ethnic and gender identities. In true Pickford fashion, Lois is reunited three years later with Carroll – "the lover waiting in the wings," as Studlar suggests. He proposes and she accepts in fulfillment of the "expected formula for resolution" which should be anticipated at the close of many of Pickford's films" (2002, 364). Lois is uncovered and engaged in a reunion with her family and class of Americans. Rather than the split-Italian racializations discussed previously, at the end of the film Pickford presents a young Italian woman who assimilates by adopting shifting disguises on her way to achieving domestic assimilation via her marriage. As one reviewer assures her readers, at the end "*Poor Little Peppina* ... is no longer poor but as charmingly pretty as only 'Our Mary' can be in a stunning evening frock." The lesson here: you can always be a rich American.

Filmography

1. *The Black Hand* (1906, AM&B, Wallace McCutcheon)
2. *The Organ Grinder's Daughter* (August 1908, Urban-Eclipse)
3. *Mafia* (January 1909, The Great Northern Film Company)
4. *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau* (1909, Kalem)
5. *The Black Hand* (Aug. 1909, Stella)
6. *An Awful Moment* (Dec. 1909, Biograph)
7. *Trailing the Black Hand* (Lux, 1910)
8. *A Child's Stratagem* (Biograph, 1910)
9. *The Two Roses* (June 1910, Thanhouser)
10. *Training the Black Hand* (Sept. 1910, Atlas)
11. *Foiling the Camorra* (1911, Yankee Films)
12. *Mutt and Jeff and the Black Hand* (October 1911, Nestor)
13. *A Bum and a Bomb* (1911, Solax)
14. *Blopps in Search of the Black Hand* (Nov. 1911, Lux)
15. *The District Attorney* (1911, Powers)
16. *Five Bold Bad Men* (1911, Essanay)
17. *Hearts of Italy* (Dec. 1911, Powers)
18. *The Black Hand* (1912, Éclair)
19. *A Midget Sherlock Holmes* (Mar 1912, Pathé)
20. *The Organ Grinder* (1912, Kalem)
21. *The Kidnapping of Dolly* (Aug. 1912, IMP)
22. *The Organ Grinder's Ward* (Oct. 1912, Reliance)
23. *Vengeance of the Mafia* (1912, Pathé)
24. *The Adventures of Lieutenant Petrosino* (Nov. 1912, Feature Photoplay Co.)
25. *Brains Versus Brawn* (Dec. 1912, Thanhouser)
26. *The Criminals* (1913, Mecca)
27. *Binks, The Black Hand* (1913, Imp)
28. *The Black Hand* (1913, Kalem)
29. *The End of the Quest* (Apr 1913, Special)
30. *In the Hands of the Black Hands* (1913, Biograph)
31. *A Black Hand Elopement* (1913, Selig)
32. *Runa and the Black Hand* (1913, Reliance)
33. *The Sign* (July 1914, Essanay)
34. *The Padrone's Ward* (1914, Powers Company)
35. *The Stiletto* (1914, Reliance)
36. *A Can of Baked Beans* (Feb. 1914, Thanhouser)
37. *Black Hand Conspiracy* (1914, Apollo)
38. *Trinkets of Tragedy* (July 1914, Essanay)
39. *Circle 17* (July 1914, Rex)
40. *The Nightingale* (5 Oct. 1914, All-Star Feature Corporation)
41. *Casey's Vendetta* (Nov. 1914, Komic)
42. *Beppo* (1914, American)

43. *The Black Hand* (Oct. 1914, Royal/Mutual Film Co.)
44. *The Black Mafia* (1914, 4 reels, Danish, imported and distributed by Fidelity Films)
45. *Under the Black Robe* (1914, Central Film Company)
46. *Black Hands* (Nov. 1914, Sterling/Universal)
47. *The Bold Banditti and the Rah Rah Boys* (December 1914, Kalem)
48. *The Amateur Detectives* (December 1914, Thanhouser)
49. *The Alien* (1915, New York Motion Picture Co.)
50. *The Last of the Mafia* (1915, Neutral Film Company)
51. *Sin* (1915, Fox)
52. *Mustaches and Bombs* (Sept. 1915, Essanay)
53. *The Postmaster of Pineapple Plains* (Nov. 1915, Falstaff)
54. *Poor Little Peppina* (March 1916, Paramount/FPL)
55. *Oh! What a Whopper* (April 1916, Universal)
56. *A Fight for Love* (May 1916, Universal)
57. *The No-Good Guy* (May 1916, Triangle-Ince)
58. *The Half-Wit* (July 1916, Lubin)
59. *What'll You Have* (July 1916, Vitagraph)
60. *The Heart of a Fool* (Nov. 1916, Vitagraph)
61. *The Adventures of a Jealous Wife* (1916, Wharton, Chapter two of the *Beatrice Fairfax* serial)
62. *A Rose of Italy* (1916, Essanay)
63. *Ham's Whirlwind Visit* (July 1916, Kalem)
64. *A Child of Mystery* (25 Dec. 1916, Universal)
65. *The Tell-Tale Step* (1917, Edison)
66. *The Black Hand* (May 1917, Metro)
67. *The Rag Baby* (July 1917, Hoyt)
68. *The Hand at the Window* (1918)
69. *The Man Beneath* (1919, Haworth Picture Corp)
70. *Private Detectives* (1920, Fox, Mutt and Jeff animated)
71. *Diane of Star Hollow* (Mar. 1921, C. R. Macauley Photo Plays)
72. *Children of the Night* (1921, Fox)
73. *Fair Lady* (1922, Bennett Pictures)
74. *Thirty Days* (1922, Jesse Lasky)
75. *The Extra Girl* (1923, Mack Sennett Productions)
76. *Black Hand Blues* (1925, Pathé)
77. *Open Spaces* (1926, Jack White)

Notes

1. He had been appointed the head of the squad when it was formed in 1906 – the same year McCutcheon's torn-from-the-headlines short was released – and was likely chosen because he was reportedly one of only seventeen officers and one of five detectives of

- Italian descent in a force of over 8,100. Furthermore, he had been petitioning the police commissioner since 1905 for additional Italian officers to combat what he estimated to be at least 30,000 representatives of the Sicilian mob in the United States.
2. The Petrosino case remained unsolved until 2014 when the Italian police arrested ninety-five members of the Palermo Mafia and in the process closed the 105-year old case. See *New York Post*, June 23, 1914.
 3. Davenport, Holt, 221–222; 61st Cong. 3rd Session., Doc. 662, *Reports of Immigration Commission, Dictionary of Races or Peoples* (Washington, Govt. Printing Office, 1911).

References

- Bastedo, J. Gordon. "Little Mary in Little Italy." *Motion Picture Magazine*, XII (October 1916).
- Bertellini, Giorgio. 2010. *Italy in Early American Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Grievesson, Lee, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield, eds. 2005. *Mob Culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Grievesson, Lee. 2005. "Gangsters and Governance in the Silent Era." In *Mob Culture*, 13–40. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Gunning, Tom. 1990. "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde." In Thomas Elsaesser (eds.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (pp. 56–63). London: BFI Publishing.
- Langman, Larry. 1998. *American Film Cycles: The Silent Era*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Hollywood Museum Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. *Poor Little Peppina*.
- Mary Pickford Papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.
- Quinn, Michael. 2001. "Distribution, the Transient Audience, and the Transition to the Feature Film." *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 35–56.
- Ruth, David. 1996. *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture 1918-1934*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Studlar, Gaylyn. 2002. "Oh, 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze." In Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra (eds.), *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (pp. 349–373). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Whitfield, Eileen. 1997. *Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press.