
George Eliot: Gender and Sexuality

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George Eliot wrote in the inescapable context of the Victorian Woman Question of the second half of the nineteenth century; the most recent, focused renewal of interest in her work occurred in the context of the second-wave feminism of the last decades of the twentieth century. These contexts have amplified the ambivalence that marks Eliot's relationship to her own position as a woman intellectual and the representation of women in her work. For much feminist scholarship on Eliot in the twentieth century, the focus was not on gender broadly conceived but on her representation of women, and its relationship to her own experience, and it is with this focus that this essay begins. A variety of critical turns and developments of the last decades, however—toward integration of formal with cultural or historical concerns; toward broader conceptions of gender studies and queer theory—have brought into view a more expansive set of questions about how Eliot's work grapples with questions of gender and sexuality, toward which this essay will move.

At its most fundamental, the “woman question” centered on the conflict of women's vocational needs and ambitions, in relation to an increasingly rich and complex public sphere, with cultural expectations that confined the vocation of woman to the home. This conflict was one that Eliot had begun to experience while she was still Mary Ann Evans, a dutiful daughter. By the time she left home, at the age of thirty, she had been running her widowed father's household for thirteen years and had cared for him devotedly through the illness that led to his death. After the Evangelical piety of her school years, she created a brief but intense household crisis in her teens by refusing to accompany her father to church; though she later regretted her intransigence, her

translation of Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus* (1846) in her twenties completed her abandonment of Christian orthodoxy. These years suggest an identity already divided between the domestic role of the dutiful daughter and the more publicly participatory role of the "strong-minded woman" that Thomas Carlyle disapprovingly pronounced her on learning of her extramarital union with the already-married George Henry Lewes (qtd. in Haight 160–61).

Certainly, when she arrived in London in the 1850s, as a *femme émancipée*, translator, essayist, and reviewer, and editor (in all but name) of the liberal *Westminster Review*, Eliot seemed on the brink of a "strong-minded," if not radically feminist, career. By 1857, when her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, appeared in volume form, most of her closest friends were feminist activists, such as Barbara Bodichon and the suffragist Clementia (Mrs. Peter) Taylor. That year itself was a significant one for feminist activism, with the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act and a failed but hard-fought effort to pass a Married Women's Property Bill, in both of which efforts Bodichon was involved. Gillian Beer observes that "The people to whom George Eliot offered energy prove almost to a woman to have been" in sympathy with the women's movement (183). Yet as so many scholars have noted, Eliot's practical support for such feminist efforts as the founding of what became Girton College, and for the feminist *English Woman's Journal*, begun by Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parks in 1858, was tepid. She contributed £50 to the foundation of the college and subscribed to, but claimed to be too busy write for, the journal.

Throughout her career, Eliot tended to emphasize not her connections to women's activism but her exceptionality as a woman and an artist, and the extent to which this exceptionality exempted her from certain kinds of political involvement. In an often quoted 1867 letter to John Morley, addressing the topic of "Female enfranchisement," she asserts that "the peculiarities of my own lot have caused me to have idiosyncrasies rather than an average judgment" (*Letters* 8:402). The inescapable, shaping features of her "lot" as an intellectual, socially emancipated woman in Victorian society form the basis for a disconnection from the "lot" of Victorian women generally. Similarly, as a novelist, she represents herself as standing above or to the side of political or ideological questions: "My function," she claimed in an 1878 letter to Taylor, "is that of the aesthetic, not doctrinal teacher . . . the rousing of the nobler feelings which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures" (*Letters* 7:44). The adjective "doctrinal" here hovers between a political and a theological sense. That ambiguity allows Eliot to disavow political action ("the prescribing of special measures") and embrace instead a quasi-hierarchical, but also quintessentially female, function—"the rousing of the nobler feelings."

Similarly, as Eliot began to conceptualize her role as a novelist, her initial concern was to distance herself from the triviality associated with popular women's writing. As many critics have noted, Eliot's *Westminster Review* essays of the 1850s function as manifestos for the ideas about fictional realism that she was developing. Two—"Woman in France: Madame de Sablé" (1854) and "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856)—focus specifically on the gender of authorship. In "Woman in France," Eliot

attempts a transvaluation of the apparently trivial, domestic matter of women's writing: "One might say, at least with regard to the [French] women of the seventeenth century, that their writings were but a charming accident of their more charming lives, like the petals which the wind shakes from the rose in its bloom" (*Selected Essays* 9). But such floral emanations from seventeenth-century aristocratic women in France, who "were not trying to make a career for themselves [and] . . . thought little, in many cases not at all, of the public" (*Selected Essays* 9) could hardly serve as a model for Eliot's needs and ambitions as a middle-class Victorian woman earning a living by her pen.

Models closer to home, however, were more threatening in their very proximity, and evoked not Eliot's admiration but her scorn. In "Silly Novels," Eliot mounts a coruscating attack on the "mind-and-millinery" genre. She mocks the genre's frank wish-fulfillment, its unapologetic mingling of worldly and ethical pretensions: "The fair writers . . . think £500 a miserable pittance; Belgravia and 'baronial halls' are their primary truths; and they have no idea of feeling interest in any man who is not at least a great landed proprietor, if not a prime minister" (*Selected Essays* 142); at the same time, these women writers appear to "think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life, is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions" (*Selected Essays* 149). What is striking about Eliot's humorous anatomization of women novelists—the "oracular species" (High Church), the "white-neck-cloth species" (Evangelical), and the "modern-antique species" (historical)—is less its lack of sisterly solidarity, how sharply Eliot draws the line between "lady novelists" and her own incipient fictional practice, than how close to that line the novels she writes will prove to fall (148, 156, 159). What is Dorothea Brooke—possessed of "that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress" (*Middlemarch* 7; ch. 1)—if not a version of "the ideal woman in faculties and flounces" (141)? Do *Romola* and *The Spanish Gypsy* avoid the anachronism of the modern-antique species, "which unfold to us the domestic life of Jannes and Jambres, the private love affairs of Sennacherib, or the mental struggles and ultimate conversion of Demetrius the silversmith" (159)? The *Westminster Review* critic was far from alone in noting that "We cannot escape the feeling that the chief interest of *Romola* reposes on ideas of moral duty and of right which are of very modern growth, and that they would have been more appropriately displayed on the modern stage" (Carroll 217). Rather than break with the feminine tradition of the "mind-and-millinery" novel, Eliot attempts to revise it. She replaces its trumped-up conflicts—"as often as not [the heroine] marries the wrong person to begin with, and she suffers terribly from the plots and intrigues of the vicious baronet . . . [but] whatever vicissitudes she may undergo, from being dashed out of her carriage to having her head shaved in a fever, she comes out of them all with a complexion more blooming and locks more redundant than ever" (*Selected Essays* 141)—with ethical crises of vocation and desire. But the heroines, the mistaken marriages, and the social "vicissitudes" remain—they are as much the stuff of High Realism as of silver fork and sensation novels. The very proximity of her own narratives to those of her sister-novelists, not the distance

between them, surely underlies the intensity—barely masked by its wit—of Eliot's disavowal of kinship.

In remaking the society novel as not silly but serious, not materialistic but moralistic, Eliot grounds her aesthetic in the suffering of women, which becomes for her a test of realism. In her own case, the choice to follow the promptings of intellectual and romantic ambition was in fact marked by loss. Her decision to live with Lewes effected a total breach with her brother Isaac, the head of the family, that was not healed until just before her death, on the occasion of her late, brief marriage to John Cross. Meanwhile, a gulf opened between herself and female peers who valued their respectability. One of the less edifying records of Victorian feminism is the consternation of several redoubtable activists for women's higher education over the propriety of visiting Eliot: "Mrs. Gurney takes the same view that you do," wrote Emily Davies to Adelaide Manning, "that it is justifiable to go and see Mrs. Lewes herself, but not to meet people at her house" (Stephen 171). Certainly, Eliot outwrote and outlasted the social repercussions of her transgressions; in her later life, no less unimpeachably respectable an admirer than Queen Victoria collected her autograph along with that of Lewes (Haight 481). The image of Eliot as marmoreal sybil, fostered by herself, by Lewes, and by Cross's *Life and Letters* buried the traces of Eliot's lifelong ambivalence, questioning, and testing of convention beneath its weight.

Reading Cross's *Life and Letters*, the popular, prolific, but less celebrated novelist Margaret Oliphant could observe enviously that Eliot had "no trouble in all her life as far as appears, but the natural one of her father's death—and perhaps coolnesses with her brothers and sisters, though that is not said" (7). This startlingly inaccurate judgment testifies to how much had to be "not said" to allow Eliot, an unmarried "wife" (who requested that her friends address her as "Mrs. Lewes"); a step- rather than biological mother (whose earnings helped to support Lewes's sons); and, in T. H. Huxley's phrase, "a person whose life and opinions were in notorious antagonism to Christian practice in regard to marriage, and to Christian theory in regard to dogma" (qtd. in Haight 548–49), to become a prominent, celebrated voice of secular morality. But the closet, as Eve Sedgwick reminds us, is a particularly uncomfortable and porous shelter. Though Eliot scaled remarkable heights as Victorian woman intellectual, she could hardly forget that from one culturally non-negotiable point of view, instantiated by her brother, she had not risen but fallen. "There is no question on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn," she wrote in a famously opaque pronouncement, "than on the 'Women Question.' It seems to me to overhang abysses of which even prostitution is not the worst" (*Letters* 5:58). Eliot's proximity to these gothic, unspecified abysses, and the real losses that it brought (of connection to or reproduction of biological family, of ordinary sociality), create a lasting connection in her work between desire and loss, a connection experienced not exclusively, but most intensely, by women.

Eliot continually imagines women as intellectual and aesthetic subjects, motivated by desires for thought, utterance, art. As continually, she narrates the frustration or abandonment of their vocations: from the Methodist preacher Dinah Morris, who at

the end of *Adam Bede* embraces her church's ban on women's ministry; to the "ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent" Dorothea Brooke (*Middlemarch* 24; ch. 3), who reads theological treatises, longs to learn classical languages, and plans utopian communities, but by the end of *Middlemarch* is "known only in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (680; Finale); to the paired singers of *Daniel Deronda*, the Princess Halm-Eberstein, whose career has severed her from all religious and familial ties, and Mirah Lapidoth, who avoids such isolation by eschewing musical performance for Deronda and Zionism; and to Armgart, in the poem of that title, who chooses performance over marriage, only to lose her voice and resign herself to teaching others.

If vocational passions are thwarted, romantic ones are not guaranteed fulfillment. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie's renunciation of her love for Stephen does not obviate the apparent necessity for her death; as she turns in despair to "the Unseen Pity that would be with her to the end," the floodwaters have already begun to rise about her, and she drowns in her brother's arms (515; bk. 7, ch. 5). Like Maggie choosing between loyalty to her clan and loyalty to her desire, Fedalma, the half-gypsy heroine of *The Spanish Gypsy*, must choose between her Spanish betrothed, Duke Silva, and her gypsy father, his captive enemy; Romola de' Bardi's love for Tito Melema ends definitively when he betrays her father by selling his books. Women's desires, whether artistic or romantic, historical or contemporary, end in loss, renunciation, or the transformation of a suffered loss into a chosen renunciation. This connection is present from the beginning of Eliot's career as a writer of fiction. Despite its apparent remove from scenes of activism or questions of women's rights, *Scenes of Clerical Life* features in its three novellas as many suffering wives: in "Amos Barton," domestically angelic Milly Barton, a "large, fair, gentle Madonna" (15; ch. 2), whose death sanctifies her otherwise ordinary, bumbling husband; in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," childlike Caterina Sarti, the first of Eliot's female singers and also the first of many fantasied or actual uxoricides; and most strikingly, Janet Dempster, the abused, alcoholic, and ultimately redeemed wife of "Janet's Repentance." Following the paths laid by this initial gallery, Eliot's major female protagonists, doomed (Maggie Tulliver), ultimately conventional (Dinah Morris, Esther Transome, Dorothea Brooke), or disillusioned (Gwendolen Harleth, Romola), struggle to forge significant lives against social restrictions and demands always tied to their identities as women. It is these struggles that anchor the realism of their narratives.

In a review in the *Westminster Review* of popular author Geraldine Jewsbury's novel *Constance Herbert*, Eliot protested "the moral . . . illustrated in the novel by the story of three ladies who, after renouncing their lovers, or being renounced by them, have the satisfaction of feeling in the end that these lovers were extremely good-for-nothing and that they (the ladies) have had an excellent riddance." Such a pleasing outcome, Eliot asserts, reflects neither "the true doctrine of renunciation, nor a true representation of the realities of life." Any true representation of "the realities of life" must confront the reality of loss. The best that Eliot's heroines can hope for is that loss will be transmuted into the heroism of renunciation: "It is the very perception that the thing we renounce is precious, is something never to be compensated to us, which

constitutes the beauty and heroism of renunciation" (*Selected Essays* 321). Maggie's fate represents perhaps Eliot's most direct rebuke to Jewsbury's false doctrine. Tempted first to run away with Stephen, and then to return to him, Maggie conquers her temptation by clinging to "the memories that no passion could long quench: the long past [that] came back to her, and with it the fountains of self-renouncing pity and affection" (515; bk. 7, ch. 5). Maggie chooses a return to her family of origin over an exogamous desire. "Women, very properly, don't change their views, but keep to the notions in which they have been brought up; it doesn't signify what they think—they are not called upon to judge or to act" (*Felix Holt* 117; ch. 2), asserts Harold Transome loftily. Harold is arrogant and ignorant; like Lydgate, he will pay for the "spots of commonness" (*Middlemarch* 123; ch. 15) that make him conventional in his social judgments and therefore blind to the significance that women's actions will come to have for him (in particular, those of his mother, in bearing him out of wedlock). But if Eliot reveals the cost, to men as well as to women, of such assumptions, she nevertheless retains at the center of her project a Victorian belief in the association of the figure of Woman with social reproduction, continuity, and instinct, and of the association of creativity, change, and invention with masculinity.

A version of Maggie's choice is repeated by Romola de' Bardi in *Romola*, who leaves her husband Tito when she discovers that he has sold her father's scholarly library, only to return at the direction of Savonarola: "My daughter, if the cross comes to you as a wife, you must carry it as a wife. You may say, 'I will forsake my husband,' but you cannot cease to be a wife" (435–36; ch. 40). Although Romola pleads that her father's death as well as Tito's betrayal have released her from her loyalties, Savonarola frames Romola's necessary return as a daughterly as much as a wifely duty: "If you held that [Christian] faith, my beloved daughter, . . . you would feel that Florence was the home of your soul as well as your birthplace, because you would see the work that was given to you to do there" (433; ch. 40). Even in cases, such as that of Eppie in *Silas Marner* and Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt*, in which the daughter chooses an elective over a biological family tie, and weds the man of her choice, the happy ending is framed as both a renunciation and a return. In rejecting her status as heiress to Transome Court and, at the same time, the hand of Harold Transome, Esther Lyon gives up a wealth and ease to which she is not indifferent, for marriage to a man determined to remain (relatively) poor. Eppie, too, in rejecting Godfrey Cass's claim of fatherhood, gives up the opportunity to become a "lady," and marries a working man instead. In both cases, the marriages are to men warmly approved of by the foster-fathers, who are included in the subsequently formed households; thus in feeling, if not in biological fact, the daughter's choice is one that entails a return to the family fold.

This necessity of choice, often between the family of origin and a new romantic or vocational direction, and always involving some moment of renunciation, that Eliot imposes on her female protagonists is central to her conception of fictional realism. Her aesthetic practice is built around her Victorian conception of the differential in experience between men and women and its consequences: "As a fact of mere zoologi-

cal evolution, woman seems to me to have the worse share in existence. But for that very reason I would the more contend that in the moral evolution we have an 'art that does mend nature.' And in the thorough recognition of that worse share, I think there is a basis for a sublimer recognition in women and a more regenerating tenderness in man" (*Letters* 4:364). It is in the representation of the operation of that "thorough recognition" that the triviality of "silly novels" is transmuted, in Eliot's imaginative effort, into her own "art that does mend nature."

While Eliot's interpretation of Victorian domestic ideology was hardly unconventional, both the bleakness of its fictional application, and its tension with Eliot's own life and career, were nevertheless puzzling to Eliot's contemporaries and almost scandalous for twentieth-century feminist criticism. In 1861, for example, Dinah Mulock (later Craik) reviewed *The Mill on the Floss* in *Macmillan's* magazine. Like Eliot a woman of letters (author, among other novels, of the bestselling *John Halifax, Gentleman* [1856], and *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* [1857–58], which offered advice and support for single women), Mulock finds sympathetic the question the novel poses: "What is to become of the hundreds of clever girls, born of uncongenial parents, hemmed in with unsympathizing kindred, . . . blest with no lover on whom to bestow their strong affections, no friend to whom to cling for guidance and support?" (Carroll 157). Yet Mulock cannot reconcile herself to what she sees as Eliot's failure to inculcate a Christian resignation that might "lighten any burdened heart, help any perplexed spirit, comfort the sorrowful, succour the tempted, or bring back the erring into the way of peace" (Carroll 156). She concludes unhappily that "uncertainty is the prevailing impression with which we close *The Mill on the Floss*" (159). Similarly, Sidney Colvin, reviewing *Middlemarch* in 1873, takes its topic to be "the necessary disappointment of a woman's nobler aspirations in a society not made to second noble aspirations in a woman," and also feels "uncertainty" in the face of the novel's "chastened and subdued . . . conclusion." Colvin, like Mulock, locates this deficit in Eliot's implicitly post-Christian worldview: "Is [the problem] . . . that a literature which confronts all the problems of life and the world . . . and all the importance of one life for the mass,—is it that such a literature must be like life itself, to leave us sad and hungry?" (Carroll 338). Ending with this rhetorical question, Colvin suggests an affirmative answer to his negative query. Like Thomas Hardy only a few years later, Colvin here proposes a female protagonist as the aptest representative of a troubling, secular, modernity. It is Tess Durbeyfield who, in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1878), experiences those "feelings that might almost have been called those of the age—the ache of modernism" (105; ch. 19)—feelings already legible in Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brooke, and Eliot herself.

In the framework of the powerful feminist scholarship that developed around Victorian women novelists beginning in the 1970s, the ache sometimes threatened to overwhelm the modernism outright. Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* (1968) lamented that "'Living in sin,' George Eliot lived the revolution as well, perhaps, but she did not write of it" (192). Zelda Austen, in the resonantly titled article "Why Feminist Critics Are Angry at George Eliot" (1976), came to Eliot's defense against this and

similar reproaches by emphasizing Eliot's "fidelity to the actual" (552) and her "pity for both men and women in their suffering [that] transcended anger" (561). In the 1980s, readings of Eliot's representations of women began to produce more ambivalent and less polarized interpretations. As Tracey Rosenberg observes in her useful summary of feminist responses to Eliot, in the 1980s "the 'traditional' modes of womanly behavior that she allegedly perpetuated began to be viewed as astute analyses of the position of women" (par. 20). The fates of Eliot's heroines, in particular Maggie Tulliver's drowning and Dorothea's diminishment into domesticity, became critical cruxes around which claims about Eliot's attitudes toward women and gender were negotiated. In Mary Jacobus's Irigarayan analysis, for example, Maggie's drowning becomes "[the] moment in the novel [at which] we move most clearly into the unbounded realm of desire, if not of wish fulfillment. It is at this moment of inundation, in fact, that the thematics of female desire surface most clearly" (78). Deirdre David concludes a book that argues for Eliot's generally "strong ideological bond to patriarchal culture and to certain conservative modes of thought" (185) with a moment of mourning for Maggie and Eliot: "Lastly, [Maggie] dies, perhaps, as an emblem of irresolvable contention between the Victorian containment of woman to an undeveloped intellectual life and the elevation of one woman intellectual to iconic sagehood" (224).

Since the 1990s, with the rise of gender and sexuality studies and the partial absorption of the methods and insights of feminist theory into a broader range of methods and inquiries, debates over the representation of women have become a less defining feature of scholarship on Eliot. In Rosenberg's account, this development is not entirely a gain; on the one hand, Eliot is "releas[ed] from the obligation to meet specific requirements in order to fulfill a position as a feminist heroine," on the other, the corollary is that "feminist research on Eliot—work which defines itself in its title or main thesis as 'feminist'—has slowed to a crawl" (par. 22). To the extent that this claim is accurate, it might not have been altogether unwelcome to Eliot, who insisted, in a letter to Jane Senior, that "I know very little about what is specially good for women—only a few things that I feel sure are good for human nature generally, and about such as these last alone, can I ever hope to write or say anything worth saying" (*Letters* 5:58). Indeed, the tension in Eliot's work between the "special" or particular situation of women, which Senior seems to be soliciting Eliot to address, and the situation of a more general "*human nature*" (*italics added*) is itself an area of inquiry that can open onto broader questions of gender and representation.

That tension between the female particular and the human general is perhaps a particularly salient iteration of what Catherine Gallagher calls "the strife between type and instance" (67) that, she suggests, characterizes fictional realism as Eliot developed it. Gallagher argues that Dorothea Brooke's struggles, and the reader's response to her character, exemplify a *general*, rather than gendered, relationship to human corporeality made vivid by fictional realism: "George Eliot is the greatest English realist because she not only makes us curious about the quotidian, not only convinces us that knowing its particularity is our ultimate ethical duty, but also, and supremely, makes us want it" (73). To the extent, however, that the constricting "type" against which

Dorothea presses as an “instance” is what was for Victorian culture the type of types—Woman—her struggle, and potentially the reader’s relationship to her, remain over-determined by gender.

Certainly thwarted vocational and romantic aims shape men’s as well as women’s careers in Eliot’s novels. With some justice, Tom Tulliver reproaches Maggie: “Yes! I have had feelings to struggle with [in his unrequired love for Lucy Deane]; but I conquered them. I have had a harder life than you have had: but I have found my comfort in doing my duty” (*The Mill on the Floss* 485; bk. 7, ch. 1). *Middlemarch* is full of failed male vocations: Casaubon’s as a scholar, Lydgate’s as a medical researcher, even the Reverend Farebrother’s passion for natural history, checked by the need to support a family of women. High-minded men—Bardo de’ Bardi in *Romola*, Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Mordecai Cohen in *Daniel Deronda*—are thwarted by physical infirmity. In “Silly Novels,” Eliot mocks the way in which “The men play a very subordinate part by [the heroine’s] side. . . . The final cause of their existence is that they may accompany the heroine on her ‘starring’ expedition through life” (*Selected Essays* 141). Eliot strives to avoid such partisanship; a social canvas on which the struggles of both men and women are given equal weight—on which, to adapt *Middlemarch*’s famous phrase, men and women show “equivalent centre[s] of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference” (*Middlemarch* 173; ch. 21)—remains one of the defining features of her novels. “She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before—a fountain of friendship toward men” (*Middlemarch* 629; ch. 76), reflects Lydgate wistfully, when Dorothea offers him financial and emotional support in the face of suspicion and self-doubt. *Deronda* eases Gwendolen’s conscience after Grandcourt drowns; Dolly Winthrop reaches out to Silas Marner when he finds himself unexpectedly the guardian of infant Eppie.

But as frequent as such connections between women and men are moments of profound division, such as Lydgate’s despairing reflection that Rosamond “no more identified herself with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests” (487; ch. 58). The very titles of her novels hint at the tension between these two poles. The masculine eponyms of *Adam Bede*, *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, and *Daniel Deronda* have seemed to many readers priggish and unreal, while the novels’ erring women (Hetty Sorrel, Mrs. Transome, Gwendolen Harleth) offer the complexity the masculine protagonists lack. Conversely, those novels most clearly centered on female protagonists are named instead for locales—*The Mill on the Floss*, *Middlemarch*—as if to insist on the public and general, not merely domestic and personal, significance of women’s lives. A telling division of structure, too, haunts many of the novels. *Middlemarch* enfolds an originally separate tale entitled “Miss Brooke” (*Middlemarch* xii); *Daniel Deronda* notoriously elicited from F. R. Leavis the opinion that the *Deronda* plot should be excised altogether; *Felix Holt*, as Bonnie Zimmerman observes, “seems to be sundered into parts corresponding to the traditional male and female spheres of interest. . . . George Eliot is forced into flimsy attempts at unification by means of complicated plot resolutions and coincidences” (447). Uniting the “separate spheres” of masculine power and feminine influence is

an aspirational as much as an achieved goal of Eliot's work. Most significantly, men's suffering in Eliot's novels lacks the conclusive significance of women's renunciation and loss. It is Maggie's death, not Tom's, that constitutes the fatality of the ending of *The Mill on the Floss*; it is Gwendolen Harleth's parting from Deronda, not the death of Ezra Cohen, that gives the close of *Daniel Deronda* its poignancy. The conflicts Eliot stages between vocation and renunciation, duty and desire, remain saturated with gendered significance.

Finally, gothic shards of murderous intent, most frequently directed against male characters, occasionally break the surface in the novels to mitigate her heroine's fates and to make room, however briefly or covertly, for wishes entirely the opposite of renunciatory. In *Middlemarch* we meet very briefly the actress Madame Laure, who repeats, in Eliot's own italics, "*I meant to do it*" as she confesses to Lydgate that she murdered her husband on stage under the cover of dramatic action (126; ch. 15). This direct linkage of aggressive motive to fatal effect is, however, unusual; usually it is a half-formed wish that precedes an apparently unconnected fatality. As Carol Christ memorably summarizes:

People die conveniently in George Eliot's novels. Grandcourt falls off a boat and drowns at the moment when Gwendolyn finds her murderous fantasies unbearable. In "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," Anthony collapses immediately before Caterina comes to the Rookery with the intention of killing him. Casaubon dies immediately before Dorothea comes to the garden to promise against her will to obey her husband's wishes after his death. By dying at the right moment, Robert Dempster saves Janet, and Tito saves Romola from their decisions to rededicate their lives to their marital duties. (131)

It is almost always men who suffer these convenient fates, and often women whose aggressive fantasies they fulfill, clearing the way for a turn from renunciations toward ends that, if disappointing in relation to earlier ambitions, still make room for a modicum of happiness. Romola, for example, becomes the head of the thriving little family consisting of herself, Tessa, Tessa's mother, and the children of Tessa and Tito. As Gillian Beer observes, calling it a "weakness. . . . The conclusion of *Romola* is [Eliot's] one conformity to that possible ending which she had resisted in [Frederika] Bremer and Jewsbury: the woman on her estate, exempted from passion and passed into wisdom" (124–25).

Beer's phrase "exempted from passion" in this context suggests that sexual desire, an erotic attraction to beauty and vitality of the kind that Romola initially feels for Tito Melema, Maggie for Stephen Guest, and Dorothea for Will Ladislaw, is as troublesome as the vocational kind. The most conventionally desirable male characters often spell trouble for the women they attract: Stephen Guest, Will Ladislaw, with his "smile [that] was delightful . . . a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm" (168; ch. 21), Tito Melema, whose "bright face show[ing] its rich tint of beauty" bursts on Romola's Miranda-like innocence

“like a wreath of spring” (105; ch. 6). Dorothea’s happy union with Ladislaw offers a counter to the disasters wreaked by the fickle Stephen and Tito, but before it can occur he deeply wounds both Rosamond and Dorothea by his flirtations, causes scandal for Dorothea by making their relationship the subject of Casaubon’s codicil, and necessitates the renunciation of her fortune in order that they may wed.

In fact, the fates of women who experience or even imagine sexuality outside of marriage in Eliot’s novels suggest that she shared Victorian mainstream culture’s distrust of the disruptive energies of eros and the localization of that distrust in a stringent demand for female “purity,” as well as a perhaps more sympathetic apprehension of the consequences of women’s “worse share in existence,” the physical as well as social burdens of pregnancy and maternity. The elaborate construction of marriages where the plot clearly calls for extramarital unions (the mock marriage into which Tito inveigles Tessa in *Romola*; the secret marriage between Godfrey Cass and Molly Farren in *Silas Marner*), and the fates of unmarried mothers are among the more conventional features of Eliot’s novels. Lydia Glasher, the about-to-be-discarded lover of Grandcourt, confronts Gwendolen Harleth to tell her that “Mr. Grandcourt ought not to marry anyone but me. I left my husband and child for him nine years ago. Those two children are his.” To Gwendolen, she appears as a gothic apparition, “as if some ghastly vision had come to [Gwendolen] in a dream and said, ‘I am a woman’s life’” (128; ch. 15). That ostentatiously admonitory scene recurs at the end of *Felix Holt*, when Esther encounters the revelation of Mrs. Transome’s long-hidden affair with Jermyn: “The dimly suggested tragedy of this woman’s life, the dreary waste of years empty of sweet trust and affection, afflicted her even to horror” (597; ch. 50). Horror too is what Dorothea imagines, warning Rosamond off an affair with Ladislaw: “I mean, marriage drinks up all our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear—but it murders our marriage—and then the marriage stays with us like a murder—and everything else is gone” (651; ch. 81). As Hina Nazar observes, writing of Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon, “In her repeated attempts to draw her estranged husband into relationship, to make a disembodied marriage a real marriage, Dorothea transforms marriage into ethics” (307). To “murder” marriage, “the bourne of so many narratives” that “is still a great beginning” (*Middlemarch* 677; ch. 86) is, in Eliot’s vision, to sever some of the strongest ties that bind, not only men and women, but realism and ethics.

Eliot’s invocations of marital intimacy can be equally reverential, as when she describes “that quiet mutual gaze of a trusting husband and wife that is like the first moment of rest or refuge from a great weariness or a great danger” shared by Nancy and Godfrey Cass in *Silas Marner* (174; ch. 20). Yet Eliot’s representation of erotic feeling, if not of sexual experience, is more unsettlingly vivid than such conventional moments might suggest. Notably, it is not Eliot’s obviously “bad” women, such as Hetty Sorrel and Rosamond Vincy, who are most susceptible to sensual pleasure. Hetty and Rosamond, in fact, are rather cold; they feel their own attractions keenly, and enjoy being looked at (always a sign of flawed morality), but their affective relationship to their masculine suitors is essentially functional: admiration feeds their egos.

Rather, it is Eliot's most heroic and monumental heroines—Maggie, Dorothea, Romola—who are unselfconsciously, vividly embodied. Dorothea, for example, found by men “bewitching when she was on horseback,” enjoys riding in “a pagan sensuous way” that makes her “[look] forward to renouncing it” (9; ch. 1). Her final reunion with Ladislaw, which causes her a “throbbing excitement,” takes place in a thunderstorm, culminating with “the flood of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions” of money and parentage that have parted them (663; ch. 83). For Gallagher, Dorothea's awakening to her erotic attraction to Ladislaw embodies the erotic energy of narrative itself. When Dorothea awakens to her “yearning” for Ladislaw, which occurs after she learns of Casaubon's codicil, she “experiences not just a reorganization of her consciousness but its annexation of a desiring body. . . . She stands for all novel characters in their demand for realization” (71–72). If she does, she embodies that demand not, like Rosamond or Hetty, by a claim for recognition *from* the masculine other, but by an overmastering impulse *toward* him.

If Dorothea comes to feel her own need for embodiment, it is Maggie whom Eliot represents as most fully embodied throughout her narrative: from her hungry, muddy, curly-haired childhood, through her queenly emergence into young adulthood, with a “broad-chested figure . . . the eyes [that] are liquid, the brown cheek [that] is firm and rounded, the full lips [that] are red,” to the climactic moments of her erotic life, the mutual attraction to Stephen (299; bk. 5, ch. 1). That attraction is located most specifically, as many critics have noted, in the fleshly reality of Maggie and Stephen's arms. Their physical relationship begins with Stephen's “offer of a firm arm”; “There is something strangely winning to most women,” the narrator reflects, “in that offer of the firm arm: the help is not wanted physically at that moment, but the sense of help—the presence of strength that is outside them and yet theirs—meets a continual want of the imagination” (408; bk. 6, ch. 6). This moment is one of the few exceptions to the implicitly masculine tone that characterizes Eliot's generalizing narrative comments; here, the narrative seems to identify with the feminine desire that it describes. It is perhaps as a way of minimizing this unaccustomed identification that the narrative voice, in the next sentence, suddenly distances itself from the awareness it has just expressed: “Either on that ground or some other, Maggie took the arm” (408; bk. 6, ch. 6). The sudden swerve from claiming intimate knowledge to waiving certainty is startling, but—for us as for Maggie—the sense of intimacy, the remembered pressure of that arm, remains.

The power of such a frank representation of female desire to disturb is attested, perhaps, by the fulminant responses that Stephen Guest, and Maggie's attraction to him, elicited from some male Victorian critics, of whom Swinburne is only the most energetic example:

If we are really to take it on trust, to confront it as a contingent or conceivable possibility, resting our reluctant faith on the authority of so great a female writer, that a woman of Maggie Tulliver's kind can be moved to any sense but that of bitter disgust and sickening disdain by a thing—I will not write, a man—of Stephen Guest's [*sic*]; if we

are to accept as truth and fact, however astonishing and revolting, so shameful an avowal, so vile a revelation as this; in that ugly and lamentable case, our only remark, as our only comfort, must be that now at least the last word of realism has surely been spoken, the last abyss of cynicism has surely been sounded and laid bare. (Carroll 164)

That the proudly Decadent author of “Anactoria,” among other works, should find so “astonishing and revolting” the attraction of a warm-blooded and naïve young woman for a handsome, admiring young man is hardly credible—unless, as his negative invocation of “realism” suggests, it is precisely the prosaic nature of the case that alarms him. Lush couplets in the voice of a lover of Sappho only serve to bring that earlier “great female writer” within the purview of a male homosocial, Hellenistic aesthetics; the contemporary expression of the desires of living women for ordinary men loudly disturbs those quiet Oxbridgean precincts.

Even more disturbing, perhaps, is the possibility that the “realism” of women’s desire might dispense altogether with a masculine object. Shortly after Maggie takes Stephen’s arm, the situation is reversed: it is Maggie’s arm that becomes the object of Stephen’s yearning:

Who has not felt the beauty of a woman’s arm? —the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness.

A mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted towards the arm, and showered kisses on it, clasping the wrist. (441–42; bk. 6, ch. 10)

Here, the narrative voice seems indicatively, or at least normatively, masculine, in its identification with the position of Stephen’s “mad impulse.” But we might ask here what Kathryn Bond Stockton asks of the narrative voice of *Middlemarch*: “Why should the narrator’s desire for a woman necessarily mark the narrator as a man?” (169). After all, Stockton points out, *Middlemarch* “comes to a climax in a scene between women [Dorothea and Rosamond]. Their erotic dynamics—an orgasmic encounter between saint and supplicant—conveys the possibility that a woman might (unconsciously) desire another woman. . . . The narrative could be read as *functioning autoerotically for a narrator* who, within the text and through the telling, takes the place of a desiring woman” (170).

Stockton is one of the few critics to have undertaken a sustained queer reading of Eliot’s fiction. If we consider the concept of “queer” representation in the expanded sense in which it is sometimes currently used—as denoting representation that falls outside of, or athwart, heterosexual norms, even if not committing itself fully to a representation of same-sex desire—then Eliot’s oeuvre certainly invites such attention. We might consider the spillover of intimacy and attachment beyond the boundaries of the officially heterosexual couple: the nonerotic friendships between men and women; the multiplication of passionate or supportive, if not always orgasmic, encounters and connections between women (Dinah and Hetty, Lucy and Maggie, Romola,

and Tessa); the characters whose vocational devotion trumps thoughts of marriage. But if Eliot invites such readings, she also resists them. Stockton's question—"Why should the narrator's desire for a woman necessarily mark the narrator as a man?"—is not entirely, in the context of Eliot's own affectional life, a rhetorical one. As Eliot's sage persona developed, particularly following the publication of *Middlemarch*, she attracted correspondence and visits from devoted readers, male and female. While she and Lewes called her female admirers "spiritual daughters," her relationships to them could be equivocal. In the case of the most devoted and frank in her acknowledgment of desire, the activist and journalist Edith Simcox, "Eliot was," as Ellen Rosenman writes, "more than willing to keep [Simcox's] desire in tension, never accepting but subtly encouraging it" (321). When Simcox pushed at the boundaries of subtlety after Lewes's death, however, Eliot reaffirmed them sharply: "She said—expressly what she has often before implied to my distress—that the love of men and women for each other must always be more and better than any other and bade me not wish to be wiser than 'God who made me'—in pious phrase" (qtd. in Vicinus 124). Eliot then allows a thrilling kiss before parting, but, as Martha Vicinus sums up the sequel:

Simcox knew exactly what she wanted—those passionate kisses by the fire came from a pent-up fire within. But Eliot knew what she did not want, and deftly pushed her aside by telling her she wanted only her "beautiful affection." Two months later Eliot, reverting to her original name, Mary Ann Evans, married the young Johnny Cross, who had earlier called her Aunt. She left it to her stepson Charles Lewes to tell Simcox. (124)

Eliot's capacity for both the experience and the representation of forms of desire and intimacy, as well her attachment to the signifying power of gender difference, were shifting, various, sometimes playful and generative, at others painful and even cruel—to her protagonists, to her acolytes, and perhaps to herself. Vicinus's barely muffled indignation on behalf of Simcox, who "knew exactly what she wanted," suggests that now that feminist critics have stopped being angry with George Eliot, queer critics may be tempted to step into a similar affective role. So many of us think we know what we want from Eliot, and it may be that none of us will ever quite have it.

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