



NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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George Eliot and Shakespeare: Defamiliarising 'second nature'

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<1>In 1873, John Fiske wrote to his wife that “I call [George Eliot and George Henry Lewes] a wonderful couple. Spencer thinks she is the greatest woman that has ever lived on the earth – the female Shakespeare, so to speak; and I imagine he is not far from right.”⁽¹⁾ It is interesting that Lewes is invoked in the creation of this Victorian phenomenon, for, like the Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Eliot and Lewes founded their relationship in part on a shared reading of Shakespeare’s plays. The couple effectively eloped to Germany in July 1854, going first to Weimar. Once settled in Berlin, they began the practice which would persist throughout their life together of reading to each other in the evening. During those months of early intimacy, Shakespeare was an almost constant presence. Between mid-November 1854 and early-February 1855, Lewes and Evans read together, usually with Lewes reading aloud, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Coriolanus*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Winter’s Tale*, *Richard III*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. They also went to see a number of Shakespeare productions, performances which were supplemented by Lewes’s acting for their domestic circle, as well as discussing contemporary criticism of Shakespeare, and generally immersing themselves in evidence of the extent of the Germans’ enthusiasm for the playwright.

<2>In Eliot’s “Recollections of Berlin, 1854-55,” written whilst alone in Dover immediately after the couple’s return to England, she recalls “the delightful, long evenings in which we read Shakspeare, Goethe, Heine and Macaulay, with German Pfefferkuchen and Semmels at the end, to complete the “Noctes coeneque deum” (Harris and Johnston 255). In that brief stay in Dover, whilst Eliot anxiously awaited the end of Lewes’s search for accommodation and the more complex negotiation of the family life which awaited his return, her reading of Shakespeare was

even more intensive. In one month, she read *Venus and Adonis*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, some of the Sonnets, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* (twice), *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, *Henry VI*, 1, 2, and 3, and began *Richard II*. Part invocation of the absent Lewes's voice, part continuation of their German reading programme, these Shakespearean evenings helped to initiate an intimate domestic relationship which would persist until Lewes's death in 1878. In her journal for 1 January 1879, Eliot writes, "Here I and sorrow sit," quoting from *King John*, III.i.73. A relationship cemented in a joint love of Shakespeare finds its most appropriate voice of loss in him too.

<3>The relationship between George Eliot and Shakespeare was not, however, always so harmonious. As Eliot's letters, essays, poems and novels indicate, Shakespeare had been a constant presence throughout her reading life, though her early letters to Maria Lewis, written in the days of her fervent Evangelicalism, manifest an uneasy consciousness of the dangers of reading Shakespeare: "we have need of as nice a power of distillation as the bee to suck nothing but honey from his pages" (16 March 1839; *Letters*, I, 22). A letter written the previous month tried to effect an assimilation between the evangelical God and Shakespeare:

I set so high a value on 'the sweet uses of adversity' that I am in danger of failing in sympathy for those who are experiencing it, and yet the word of God is not more express on any point than on the inevitable endurance of suffering to the Christian more peculiarly than to the worldling and on the special blessings derived from that endurance. (27 February 1839; *Letters*, I, 15-116)

The eager over-insistence on the good of suffering belies the gentle cajoling and sympathy of the Duke's speech in *As You Like It*, I, ii, where he tries to reconcile his men to their exiled lot, and demonstrates a form of immature reading practice which extracts support for the writer's own religious convictions. A later use of the same phrase from *As You Like It*, which Novy and Adrian Poole note is the play most often quoted by Mary Ann Evans in her early correspondence, (2) shows a much more sympathetic reading, both of Shakespeare and of suffering, and no longer feels the need to assert with the ease of immature conviction, the "special blessings" of that state. In the later letter, indeed, the Shakespearean phrase operates as a starting-point for a more expansive sympathy:

I have found already some of the 'sweet uses' that belong only to what is called trouble, which is after all only a deepened gaze into life, like the sight of the darker blue and the thickening of stars when the hazy effect of

twilight is gone. (to Sara Hennell, 26 April 1848; *Letters*, I, 259)

Rather than ending in an invocation to an Old Testament God, the Shakespearean phrase now sounds out into a poignantly infinite and beautiful universe, and gives the first intimation of the dimensions of what would become a central creed of Eliot's fiction, and especially of *Middlemarch*:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence (194).

Through the Shakespearean lines, Eliot begins to recognise the ineluctability of suffering in the 'working day world', another 'favourite little epithet' from *As You Like It*, and allows it to be made part of the foundation of the community, rather than exist as a selfish Evangelical good (194).

<4>Many critics have noted the awkwardness of Eliot's relationship with Shakespeare. John Lyon writes that "George Eliot's creativity is in large part hostile and negative," and that "such hostility extends into her relationship with Shakespeare" (116). Adrian Poole argues that Eliot is "divided between admiration and suspicion," and that she "calls attention to the points at which her own plot-lines, story, patterns, dramatic figures and predicaments converge with [Shakespeare's], then asks her reader to reflect on the likeness and difference between them" (132-33). Marianne Novy finds that "Eliot simultaneously claims and critically transforms Shakespeare" (65). In a variety of ways, these critics are responding to something fundamentally suspicious, cautious, even rebarbative in Eliot's professional reading of Shakespeare, an influence reluctantly felt, a hierarchy fearfully encountered though neither perhaps actively recognised nor conceded.

<5>This may best be demonstrated if we compare Eliot's use of *Coriolanus* in *Felix Holt*, with that of Charlotte Brontë in chapter six of *Shirley* (1849). Infrequently performed in the nineteenth century, the play and figure of Coriolanus nonetheless had considerable cultural resonance for the Victorians, as witnessed by the number of ships and racehorses named after the Roman hero, and by the way in which, as Marianne Novy demonstrates, he became a figure susceptible of adoption by a variety of politicians of radically differing standpoints (Novy 70). The tension of the play rests in

the even-handedness with which it represents both Coriolanus's pride and his inflammatory disdain of the Roman citizens, his greatness and ardour alongside his democratic blindness. As such it was a play of which Hazlitt wrote that "Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke's Reflections, or Paine's Rights of Man, or the Debates in both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution or our own," so profoundly did he see it as articulating some of the fundamental political conditions of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, a period in which the rise of the mob or multitude was ever more apparent in the agitation for universal suffrage (qtd. in Novy 38). In *li*, Caius Marcius specifically declaims against the mechanisms of burgeoning democracy in Rome in his assessment of the function of the tribunes:

Five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdoms,
Of their own choice: one's Junius Brutus,
Sicinius Veletus, and I know not - 'sdeath!
The rabble should have first unroof'd the city,
Ere so prevail'd with me; it will in time
Win upon power, and throw forth greater themes
For insurrection's arguing. (*li*.221-27)

He anticipates the terms of the struggle for democracy in Britain, but also unwittingly articulates the more fundamental distrust between classes which generated the generic conflicts underlying the developments of modern society.

<6>Brontë's *Caroline Helstone* uses the play to attempt to instruct her Coriolanian cousin Robert Moore about his responsibilities to his workers, his own pride, and a form of Englishness which his upbringing in Belgium may not have equipped him to recognise (Novy 34). In a sleight of hand which would be repeated throughout the century, Shakespeare's Roman hero becomes archetypally English in Brontë's context of a clash between a despairing mob or multitude and the figure of a charismatic and disdainful leader. As we see in Caroline and Robert's conversations, each clearly finds support for their own ideological position in Shakespeare's play, and they thus act out the terms of the play's dilemma. Robert finds a self-justificatory power in Coriolanus's speeches, whereas Caroline seeks to impress upon him the personal dangers of inflexibility and austerity:

Coriolanus in glory; Coriolanus in disaster; Coriolanus banished, followed like
giant-shades one after the other. Before the vision of the banished man,
Moore's spirit seemed to pause. He stood on the hearth of Aufidius's hall,

facing the image of greatness fallen, but greater than ever in that low estate. He saw 'the grim appearance,' the dark face 'bearing command in it,' 'the noble vessel with its tackle torn.' With the revenge of Caius Marcius, Moore perfectly sympathized; he was not scandalized by it; and again Caroline whispered, 'There I see another glimpse of brotherhood in error' (Bronte 116-17).

As Margaret Arnold notes, Brontë takes *Coriolanus* and places it within a familiar Victorian setting: "She has placed the poverty and class struggle of *Coriolanus* in the industrial world she and her readers understand and has invited them to note the parallels between a young, militant business 'hero' and the isolated, proud soldier of Shakespeare's tragedy" (86). Though Arnold claims that Brontë transforms her source material through investing in the figures of Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, who "build mental alternatives to nineteenth-century patriarchal structures" (87), nonetheless, the terms of their dissent are implicit in Shakespeare's own dissection of his flawed hero, that is, the authority of their insight comes from Shakespeare. Brontë's use of her Shakespearean source represents less of a transformation than a transference of his dynamics into a modern setting, an allegorisation of the play which acts to naturalise its structural dynamics.

<7>On the face of it, Eliot's use of *Coriolanus* as one of the inspirations behind her 'radical' Felix Holt is much more curious. Eliot's hero is an artisan demagogue who rejects the possibility of affiliating himself with a higher and more aspirational class, determined as he is to achieve political representation for the working classes. However, Felix shares certain fundamental qualities with *Coriolanus*. He too is proud and independent, and disdains those whom he would help, fearing the implications of their too ready assimilation into a political process for which they are insufficiently prepared. However, Felix is subject, as *Coriolanus* is not, to an educative process which takes the motivation of pride and seeks to re-shape its aggressive potency for more socially ameliorative and less exclusive ends. *Coriolanus*'s pride and his exceptional status are the foundations of a fundamental isolation which is his greatest vulnerability, and Eliot's greatest abhorrence, working as it does against the possibility of achieved community. Unlike *Coriolanus*, Felix can be assimilated back into the social structure he has previously shunned, through the agency of Esther Lyon, an agency which again contrasts markedly with that of *Virgilia*, her nearest counterpart in *Coriolanus*. Esther acts decisively not to change Felix's mind at a crucial public moment as do *Virgilia* and *Volumnia*, but rather to translate him to his contemporaries, using her sympathy and love as cross-class conduits of what she interprets as Felix's misunderstood heroism. In a wonderfully theatrical moment, Esther takes the witness stand at Felix's trial and

inserts into an event of grave political and criminal considerations her feminine sympathies, which are manifested in an ardour which “breaks through formulas too rigorously urged on men by daily practical needs [...] she is the added impulse that shatters the stiffening crust of cautious experience” (Eliot 447). Esther takes a stance against the formulaic application of legal and capitalist interests, and also, arguably against her Shakespearean source. Virgilia is practically mute, both as wife and mother, easily cowed by her mother-in-law, and finding her greatest eloquence in silence. By contrast, Esther is moved to misery by “the sense that all had not been said which might have been said on behalf of Felix,” and is subsequently impelled to speak, thus displaying that feminine “ardour which has flashed out and illuminated all poetry and history [and which] was burning today in the bosom of sweet Esther Lyon” (447). Esther may have her literary forebears, may indeed have found those forebears in the reading which Felix had earlier denigrated, but they are not to be found in *Coriolanus*.

<8>Eliot has taken a skeletal emotional plot from *Coriolanus*, and re-written it. She has re-conceived it for a new fictional form, for a new post-industrial, post-capitalist audience, and for an audience of women readers being educated, possibly reluctantly, by Ruskin to find Virgilia “perhaps [the] loveliest’ of Shakespeare’s heroines, ‘conceived in the highest heroic type of humanity” (Ruskin par. 56). *Felix Holt* shows Eliot as impatient with such a form of determination, and indeed with Shakespearean forms of tragic heroism. Her heroes must survive, and must return to the working-day world which John Lyon argues is Eliot’s refuge and riposte against Shakespeare’s aristocratic settings. It is within the ‘home epic’ celebrated by the Finale of *Middlemarch*, that heroism is to be resituated; that is, within the domestic, familial, and communal. It is a form of heroism that is also profoundly available to, and may indeed be exemplified by, women. The aversion to the exceptional that Gillian Beer noted in Eliot’s works is clearly in evidence here, and is activated in the emotional, rather than political, radicalism of Esther which is determined to foster sympathy wherever possible and at whatever cost to herself in terms of her lost inheritance (201).

<9>Eliot is then both borrowing from, and arguing with, Shakespeare. She disputes the power relations, and gender assumptions of *Coriolanus*, just as she is inspired by his image of an independent, radical leader of unparalleled integrity. But what she is also doing here, and I believe elsewhere in her references to Shakespeare, is disputing the ways in which Shakespeare was being appropriated by her contemporaries, the ways in which Shakespeare was becoming part of an accustomed vocabulary. Charlotte Brontë’s characters and contemporary politicians might dispute ownership of the play’s meanings, but their right to claim that ownership was not at issue. Shakespeare was comfortably being appropriated into Victorian usage, and in that appropriation, his

historical integrity was being denied. George Eliot is responding as a fellow author to this implicit false idealisation of an earlier colleague, but she is also reacting viscerally to what “Susan Buck-Morss, paraphrasing Adorno, calls second nature,” that is “a negating, critical concept which referred to the false mythical appearance of given reality as ahistorical and absolute” (qtd. in Harries 3). That is, as Martin Harries goes on to elaborate, “Shakespeare may be part of a nearly impermeable second nature” (Harries 4) adopted unthinkingly, automatically, and specifically as part of a constructed form of Englishness whose political resonance rests precisely on its being recognised as a form of “second nature.” However, as Harries also goes on to suggest, “Once in a while [...] that easy order of things goes awry, and Shakespearean language that at other times might fertilize second nature becomes a symptom of faults in its carapace,” and may act to “defamiliarise the supposedly solid structure of second nature” (Harries 4). It is this capacity for defamiliarisation that Eliot builds on in her relationship with and adaptation of Shakespeare, a capacity that might seem aggressive towards the playwright but which might more properly be seen as disputing his too easy appropriation by her contemporaries.

<10>This is forcefully demonstrated through Eliot’s depiction of Dorothea in *Middlemarch*. Dorothea’s uniqueness is in part conveyed through Eliot’s referring to a Shakespearean heroine in describing her. This common nineteenth-century device relied upon readers’ awareness both of Shakespeare’s plays and, more importantly, prevailing critical views of a certain part, and the ways in which it had been written into a Victorian rhetoric of femininity. Eliot does not often resort to this potentially ahistorical and homogenising strategy, and when she does so her references to Shakespeare’s women are rarely other than provocative or ironic. Her allusions expose the casualness of Shakespearean heroines’ incorporation into the Victorian period, and demonstrate what it means for society to make such allusions. Caterina Sarti is linked with Desdemona and Juliet, as well as Helen of Troy and Dido, as Eliot asserts her right “to be a heroine” despite her lack of astronomical knowledge.⁽³⁾ The allusion works ironically here to point up the nature of the tragic version of ‘heroism’ open to these women, and to assert the lack of a match between knowledge or experience and the tragic status foisted upon women. Their status depends not upon what they know, but upon the ambivalent talent for loving, in which it is probable, notes Eliot of Caterina, that “the most astronomical of women could not have surpassed her” (116).

<11>There is, in Eliot’s passing reference to Juliet and Imogen in describing Rosamond Vincy’s schooling, an acknowledgement of the leveling out of the particularities both of the heroines and of the Victorian girl in their incorporation into a fixed scheme of appropriate femininity:

Mrs Lemon herself had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional. We cannot help the way in which people speak of us, and probably if Mrs Lemon had undertaken to describe Juliet or Imogen, these heroines would not have seemed poetical. (96)

Thus Eliot exposes the redundancy of both the aspirational education and the reference, as part of her critique of Middlemarch society's expectations of its women. That Rosamond colludes in her incorporation into a scheme of female romance rendered empty of much meaning is signaled in Eliot's comments about Rosamond's stifled and stifling imagination: "in Rosamond's romance it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero, or of his serious business in the world: of course, he had a profession and was clever, as well as sufficiently handsome" (166). There is little hope here for a recognition of the specificities of Shakespeare's heroines, and particularly of the tragic endings of their stories. However, these tragic elements may resonate with the reader as Eliot signals the moral illiteracy to which Rosamond and her society are subject.

<12>Eliot chooses to liken Dorothea to a Shakespearean heroine at one of the most overtly dramatic moments of the novel as she enters the drawing-room in which Rosamond and Will are playing music together. The moment is multiply dramatic, and its effect carefully managed. We are alerted first to the rather timeless effect of Dorothea's presence, then to its contrast to Rosamond's style, to the frisson of her presence in an alien social setting, to her appearance before the man who adores her, and finally to the complications of rumour and speculation that hasten Dorothea's exit. The reference to Imogen imports a specifically theatrical instruction to the reader, and also points up the distinction between Dorothea's apparently timeless qualities and Rosamond's manufactured attractions, thus participating in the novel's central debate about the available contexts for female heroism. Within those contexts, Shakespeare is a crucial factor:

When the drawing-room door opened and Dorothea entered, there was a sort of contrast not infrequent in country life when the habits of the different ranks were less blent than now. Let those who know, tell us exactly what stuff it was that Dorothea wore in those days of mild autumn – that thin white woollen stuff soft to the touch and soft to the eye. It always seemed to have been lately washed, and to smell of the sweet hedges –

was always in the shape of a pelisse with sleeves hanging all out of the fashion. Yet if she had entered before a still audience as Imogen or Cato's daughter, the dress might have seemed right enough: the grace and dignity were in her limbs and neck; and about her simply parted hair and candid eyes the large round poke which was then in the fate of women, seemed no more odd as a head-dress than the godly trencher we call a halo. By the present audience of two persons, no dramatic heroine could have been expected with more interest than Mrs Casaubon. (432)

The moment is rife with sexual tension, and marital complication, an effect heightened by the reinforcing reference to Cato's daughter Marcia, who was the subject of politicised marital negotiations in Addison's *Cato* (1713).

<13>According to Anna Jameson, Imogen is "the most perfect" of Shakespeare's heroines. Other heroines might exceed her in particular aspects, but:

there is no female portrait that can be compared to Imogen as a woman – none in which so great a variety of tints are mingled together into such perfect harmony. In her, we have all the fervour of youthful tenderness, all the romance of youthful fancy, all the enchantment of ideal grace, – the bloom of beauty, the brightness of intellect, and the dignity of rank, taking a peculiar hue from the conjugal character which is shed over all, like a consecration and a holy charm (158).

She is "the angel of light, whose lovely presence pervades and animates the whole piece" (158). Imogen is also one of Ruskin's "perfect women."⁽⁴⁾ However, in the mid-1860s, as Ruskin knew, the terms and possibilities of that perfection were being questioned. In 1864, Helen Faucit had made her return to the London stage – from which she had been absent for six years – in Samuel Phelps' production of *Cymbeline*, and was seen in that play by Eliot. Something of Faucit's conception of the role can be gleaned from her letter on Imogen in *Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (1887), where she writes,

It has been my happy lot to impersonate not a few ideal women [...] but Imogen has always occupied the largest place in my heart; and while she taxed largely my powers of impersonation, she has always repaid me for the effort tenfold by the delight I felt at being the means of placing a being in every way so noble before the eyes and hearts of my audiences, and of making them feel, perhaps, and think of her, and of him to whose genius we

owe her, with something of my own reverence and love (160).

Though largely a critical success, Faucit's 1864 performance did have its detractors, as Carol Jones Carlisle records:

An apologist for the newer school of acting, however, argued on the basis of changing political and social attitudes that her style, grounded in 'dramatic idealism,' was no longer in tune with the times. He maintained that, despite *Cymbeline's* admitted incongruity with modern realism, and despite Imogen's airy ideality in some passages, an infusion of human weakness was needed for a greater sense of reality (212).

The ideality of Faucit's acting, and arguably of Imogen herself, clashes with the modernity of the critics, as does Dorothea against the leveling incomprehension of Middlemarch.

<14>The figure and situation of Imogen contain potent parallels with those of Dorothea which reveal something of the ways in which Shakespeare becomes transmuted in the fiction of Eliot. Of particular note is what Jameson describes as "the conjugal tenderness" of Imogen, which "is at once the chief subject of the drama and the pervading charm of her character" (162). In Dorothea's conjugal situation, Eliot takes the elements of Imogen's predicament and re-shapes, compacts and complicates them. Imogen's difficulties rest in the clash between her feelings and those of her father for the orphaned Posthumus, with whom she had been brought up. Imogen's subsequent marriage to Posthumus causes outrage to Cymbeline, who exiles Posthumus. Posthumus's situation echoes that of Will Ladislaw: both are orphaned and brought up by benefactors, whom they estrange by their love for a woman, respectively a daughter and a wife/daughter, deemed by their benefactor to be out of their reach. Eliot compacts the Shakespearean situation by combining the situation of the outraged benefactor with that of a fearful, jealous husband, perhaps articulating something of a jealously incestuous dimension to Cymbeline's anger. She removes the story from its situation in a royal court, as Shakespeare removed his play from its basis in the company of Italian merchants meeting in a Paris tavern in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, situating it instead within the contexts of small-town Midlands society, the larger European aspirations of both Casaubon and Will, and the small-mindedness of Casaubon's jealousies.

<15>Like Imogen, Dorothea is variously tested, before being able to effect a relationship with one whom many around her deem not good enough for her. Whilst

Imogen finds a context for her being in the play's resolution, in which her morality and virtue are not only confirmed to her husband, but upheld as a beacon for her society, Dorothea's fate is less obviously satisfying, as she faces a form of exile from Middlemarch, condemned by her aspirations to move to London. Curiously, the dimensions of her fate prefigure the conclusion of Imogen's story as imagined by the actress Helena Faucit. In her series of letters on Shakespeare's heroines, Faucit takes up the common fictionalising practice of many contemporary commentators who wove fuller histories for characters than Shakespeare had supplied. Mary Cowden Clarke provided his women with girlhoods, Faucit imagined their lives after the plays had ended. For Imogen, she envisages not the realisation of a happy marriage, but Imogen's premature death, brought on by the physical and emotional suffering she had been through: "Tremblingly, gradually, and oh, how reluctantly! the hearts to whom that life is so precious will see the sweet smile which greets them grow fainter, will hear the loved voice grow feebler!" (Faucit 225). She continues, in words which signal something of the diffusive, distanced effect of Dorothea, that Imogen's, lovely soul will be to them "Like a star Beacons from the abodes where the Immortals are;" inspiring to worthy lives, and sustaining them with the hope that where she is, they may, in God's good time, become fit to be. Something of this the "divine Imogen" is to us also (225-26).

<16>The Victorian actress anticipates that Imogen's exceptionalism, like Dorothea's, cannot be sustained in her native context. Eliot's reference to Imogen, then, rather than passively invoking the terms of a heroine with whose character and whose predicament Dorothea has something in common, works instead to highlight her character's lack of situatedness in her own historical moment. Her appearance as an Imogen-figure encapsulates Dorothea's dilemma throughout the novel: how to engineer a fit between her own aspirations and the conditions which cannot but misinterpret those aspirations, to the extent of effectively nullifying them through speculation and idle gossip.

<17> In an early review under the name of Mary Ann Evans of Saint-Marc Girardin's *Cours de littérature dramatique* (1855), entitled "Love in the Drama," the novelist demonstrates the appropriateness of using Shakespeare's heroines to signal such a dilemma. In his book, Girardin surveys "the general expression of Love under the varying conditions of society, from antiquity down to the seventeenth century."⁽⁵⁾ The review spends some time on its consideration of those Shakespearean women, notably Juliet, Desdemona, Rosalind, and Portia, who frankly "avow their love, not only to themselves, but to the men they love [...]. Then there are the women [the two Helenas, Sylvia, Viola, and Olivia] who love without being loved in return, and some of whom even sue for love" (255). Evans notes that this is "inconvenient for those whose creed includes at

once the doctrine of Shakespeare's infallibility and the doctrines of modern propriety," and argues that such frankness "must be simply a natural manifestation which has only been gradually and partially repressed by the complex influences of modern civilization" (254-55). In so far as they can be Victorian heroines, Eliot suggests, Shakespeare's women must be either misunderstood or understood in opposition to prevailing mores.

<18>Dorothea too frankly speaks, or sobs out, her love for Will, offending proprieties but achieving her match, and in her situation we see the clash of natural manifestations and modern civilisation, a clash which would reverberate in the broader international and spiritual movements of *Daniel Deronda*, but which reaches its most intense individual state in the case of Dorothea. The very words used by Dorothea in her declaration to Will move from the splendour of her overwhelming passion and the gesture of rejecting her wealth – "Oh, I cannot bear it ' my heart will break [...] I don't mind about poverty – I hate my wealth" (811) – to the financial exigencies of the modern moment – "We could live quite well on my own fortune – it is too much – seven hundred-a-year – I want so little – no new clothes – and I will learn what everything costs" (812). The Shakespearean-ness of Dorothea is both her triumph and the measure of her defeat, her greatness and that greatness's self-defining impotence within the world of Middlemarch.

<19>There is no place, Eliot seems to be saying, for the Shakespearean heroine, or even for a properly understood Shakespeare, in the world of Middlemarch, and at the end of the novel of course, Dorothea leaves for London. Carol Siegel writes of the way in which at the end of the novel, "Dorothea crosses the border into the domestic plot because within the strictures of Eliot's realism that is the only place Eliot's Shakespearean fantasies can lead" (44). Siegel's is a compelling argument for the impossibility of sustaining the Sonnets', and by extension, the Comedies', "naturalization of multiple forms of desire" (50) within the context of the Victorian novel, and of translating that desire into nineteenth-century heterosexual terms within *Middlemarch*. However, as we have seen, the existence of an emotional freedom and aspiration that might be termed Shakespearean is a crucial means by which Eliot can signal alternative lives and possibilities within the novel. That these possibilities and identities seem to remain primarily textual is an important part of the novel's meaning. Eliot's function as narrator is arguably to expose the interpretative gap between Shakespeare and Middlemarch, between Shakespearean tropes and the use made of them by Middlemarchers, for instance in Mrs Cadwallader's slighting reference to Will as "Mr Orlando Ladislaw" (728). Characters' direct reference to Shakespeare and his characters are few, but telling in their limitations. Celia is made "a little uneasy at [Dorothea's] Hamlet-like raving" (776), Mary Garth's comparison of herself to Ophelia

and Juliet has a primarily ironising force (138). Casaubon's use of "who with repentance is not satisfied, is not of heaven or earth" from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (V. iv. 79) is self-satisfied and emotionally self-deluding in shutting down the possibility of further communication with Dorothea. The use of Shakespeare amongst the novel's epigraphs goes some way to establishing a more symbiotic interpretative relationship between the worlds of Middlemarch and Shakespeare, but the most important bridge is arguably in the person and function of the novelist, and her recognition of the novel form as an appropriate tool for accommodating Shakespearean influences within the Victorian period.

<20>Eliot's use of Shakespeare works cunningly to educate her readers through the means of their own aspirational fantasies of identification with Shakespeare, as she exposes the grounds by which those fantasies are made impossible in the small-minded mercantilism and class-based discrimination of Middlemarch. In the projection of Will and Dorothea's future, there is the promise of at least a partial realisation of their Shakespearean potential, as mutually passionate lovers enjoying the prolongation of that courtship and education in conversation which is the lot of Shakespeare's comedic heroes and heroines. There is also, of course, in Dorothea's "finely touched spirit [which] had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible" (838) an echo of Duke Vincentio's words to Angelo in I.i. of *Measure for Measure*:

Spirits are not finely touch'd
But to fine issues, nor Nature never lends
The smallest scruple of her excellence,
But, like a thrifty goddess, she determines
Herself the glory of a creditor,
Both thanks and use. (I.i.35-9)

But we leave Middlemarch rather with the uneasy promise of their being forgotten than with the promise of being made immortal that Shakespearean identification might offer. If Dorothea's influence is to persist it will be because of her ongoing actions, rather than through a moment of identification with a character from a genre and time not her own. As Eliot's text moves through a variety of moments of contact with Shakespeare's work, it speaks not so much of that work itself, as of the multiple possibilities of the relationship between the new and old texts, new readers and old texts, and between the play or poem and the Victorian novel. Eliot is not interested in memorialising or preserving Shakespeare, but in exploring what has become of him and his work over time, and in assessing the ways in which he and his work can still speak to a Victorian audience. As such, the quality of her engagement with Shakespeare is

complex. Eliot is interested rather in the nature of her society's relationship with the playwright, with the possible shapes it might take, than in herself assimilating particular effects, lines or characters for her own ends. *Middlemarch* is a text in which Shakespeare and the Victorians can speak to each other, albeit in a conversation in which much is misheard over the distance of the centuries between Shakespeare and the Victorians.

Endnotes

(1) 23 November 1873, in *The Letters of George Eliot*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), V, 465. Fiske (1842-1901) was assistant librarian at Harvard from 1872-79. He was also author of *Myths and Myth-Makers* (1872), a copy of which he sent to George Eliot. He was previously known to her as a contributor to the *Fortnightly*.^(^)

(2) See Adrian Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London: Arden, 2004), pp. 130-31, and Novy, p. 107.^(^)

(3) 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story' in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998), p. 116, ch. 4.^(^)

(4) Ruskin writes in 'Of Queens' Gardens', that there is hardly a Shakespeare play 'that has not a perfect woman in it, steadfast in grave hope, and errorless purpose: Cordelia, Desdemona, Isabella, Hermione, Imogen, Queen Catherine, Perdita, Sylvia, Viola, Rosalind, Helena, and last, and perhaps loveliest, Virgilia, all are faultless' (*Sesame and Lilies* (London: Allen, 1911; 1865), para. 56.^(^)

(5) The review is reproduced in Joseph Wiesenfarth, ed., *George Eliot: A Writer's Notebook, 1854-1879, and Uncollected Writings* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 1981), pp. 253-55 (p. 253-54).^(^)

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