

**'One Culture' or More? Science and the Novel in Moral Combat**

[\*Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel\*](#). Anne DeWitt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 273pp.

Reviewed by [Adelene Buckland](#), King's College London

<1>Anne DeWitt's subject matter in *Moral Authority, Men of Science, and the Victorian Novel* – the study of “literature and science” in the nineteenth-century novel – may be well-trodden by literary scholars, but this is offset by a trenchant introduction announcing DeWitt's bold ambition to challenge the founding critical methodology on which this booming scholarly field is based. Beginning by criticizing Gillian Beer's “two-way traffic” between literature and science and (especially) George Levine's model of “one culture” in which scientific and literary ideas all brew in the same pot, shaping and shaped by one another often in insidious or unconscious ways, DeWitt explores the novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, H.G. Wells, and antivivisection novels by such writers as Wilkie Collins and Florence Marryat. Surefootedly absorbing arguments from both literary and history of science scholarship, she argues against the “one culture” model's essentially positive valorization of literary and scientific exchange in the period to tell a somewhat different story. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, natural historical models of scientific participation continued to flourish, she argues, with a widespread argument in circulation (often promulgated in literary texts) that scientific habits and training were conducive to exemplary moral behavior, and taught patience, sympathy, reverence for nature or for “facts,” or even appreciation for the wonders of God's world. As science became (broadly speaking) a professionalized and largely male discipline, these claims for the moral virtues of scientific work increasingly gave way to literary denunciations of science as essentially corrosive to individual and public morality, culminating in the bitter debate over vivisection in the 1880s and 1890s. In this debate, the antivivisection novel angrily began to claim morality as its own special area of expertise in contradistinction to science. Beginning with *Middlemarch* (1871-72), DeWitt shows that the novel began to divorce moral excellence from science (and from scientific men) and instead to situate it with women, fiction, and an emotional life increasingly characterized as at odds with the nature of scientific work.

<2>DeWitt is certainly not the first to critique Levine's "one culture" model (and its ubiquity in literature and science studies) by pointing out that the relationship between literatures and scientific work was fraught and sometimes bitterly contested. Furthermore, in recent years other scholars have critiqued the very notion of "literature and science" studies on the grounds that neither "literature" nor "science" are stable fields, but instead share complex, interlocking, and dynamic histories. Nonetheless, *Moral Authority* offers a fresh and provocative voice to a growing debate on the methodological grounds on which such studies should now proceed. DeWitt achieves this in part by her astute attention as much to the difficulties of her arguments and her terminology as to their persuasiveness. To take the key example of this, she is always alert to the dangers of her use of the term "professionalization," a deeply contested term in the history of science. As DeWitt often reminds us, the landscape of practices that constituted "science" was complex and ever-changing; scientific identity in the period was shifting and multivalent, and there was no clear, fixed definition of either "literature" or "science" – it took much "boundary-work," as she puts it, to make such terms make sense. For instance, in Chapter Two on Eliot and Gaskell DeWitt notes that "it would not be precisely accurate to label Lydgate a professional scientist" (he is a doctor) and that "the category of scientific professional hardly existed in the 1870s, much less in the early 1830s when the novel takes place" (87). Nonetheless, in considering the relative professionalization (or at least the professional aspirations) of Lydgate's version of science, and comparing it with Farebrother's more wide-ranging and less expert absorption in natural history, DeWitt is able to convincingly tackle Sally Shuttleworth's now-canonical reading of Eliot as moving from sympathy with natural history to sympathy with experimental science as methods for comprehending the world, a move Shuttleworth considers to have largely taken place by the time Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*.

<3>Occasionally the frequency of these caveats about 'professionalization' begs questions of the overarching argument. In a discussion of Eliot's partner G.H. Lewes, for instance, DeWitt opposes not only natural history, but "merely popular works" against "those that are sufficiently philosophic to be taken seriously by the scientific community," and notes "how precarious such a categorization was" (81). In Chapter Three on Hardy, DeWitt characterizes Swithin St. Cleeve, the protagonist of *Two on a Tower* (1882), as "a professional scientist – a term that I use advisedly, given its inherent risk of anachronism" (116), ultimately defining this "professional" status as "his entry into a field of experts bounded off from the rest of society" (116). She notes later that Fitzpiers in *The Woodlanders* is not a scientist or a man of science, but includes him in the discussion because he is a professional, a representative of the modern. He is also, she says, a dilettante – dilettantism being another version of male participation in science that is neither professional, nor popular, nor necessarily elite, nor necessarily natural-historical. DeWitt also notes the frequently negative associations of the term "professional" in the period, standing as it often did for mere technical knowledge or signalling a lack of the requisite disinterestedness supposed to come with being paid for scientific work. As such,

“professional” science is equated sometimes with T.H. Huxley and John Tyndall’s scientific naturalism (and for an important argument that these men were passionate defenders of the morality of scientific work, the reader could not do better than to read the collection of essays in George Levine’s *Realism, Ethics, Secularism* – not appearing in the bibliography here).<sup>(1)</sup> DeWitt also equates “professionalization” by turns with a rejection of natural history and its methods and practices, with an elitism that is opposed to mere popularism or an elitism that is based on technical expertise, with institutional and/or social exclusivity, with a dedicated vocation, with dilettantism; in other words, these are overlapping, but far from identical terms. If this sometimes feels just a little too slippery, it might also be noted that there are several obvious examples (*Frankenstein*, *Dr. Faustus*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, to take just a few) long predating “professionalization,” in which science is depicted as either requiring or producing emotional detachment, social isolation, elitism or abstruseness, and even moral corruption. DeWitt is convincing when she argues that some understanding of “professionalization” was a significant feature in the characterization of science as morally corrosive and as disconnected from many of the important features of emotional and social life in the nineteenth century. But her book less settles this debate than raises an important and provocative question that scholars will do well to interrogate further.

Nonetheless, the book’s two final and most compelling chapters demonstrate the usefulness of DeWitt’s approach. In Chapter Five on Wells, DeWitt notes both the author’s attraction to science and his scientific training, and the apparent contradiction that he also “makes the representation of science and the representation of relationships mutually exclusive” in his novels, following a precedent set by Eliot and Hardy (179). Wells, she argues, turned from scientific romance to more realist forms of writing in order to resolve this contradiction, and in doing so he began to criticize aestheticism and science alike for a retreat from social obligation and interaction – it is not really science, but certain kinds of “professional” science that come under attack. DeWitt is particularly persuasive in her account of Wells’s indictment of “professorial science” in his 1912 novel *Marriage* – of the workings of scientific institutions and their perceived effects on the moral, intellectual, and social character of scientific practitioners. Furthermore, in her excellent fourth chapter, DeWitt draws widely on both fictional and nonfictional antivivisection texts to demonstrate that vivisectionists characterized their opponents as interfering and ignorant women with little understanding of science, now an increasingly professionalized and male domain. For their part, antivivisectionists did not oppose this “separate spheres” ideology, but endorsed it to claim morality as the special province of women in public life, critiquing the exclusionary practices of professionalized science as they did so. DeWitt is particularly compelling as she evinces examples from several antivivisection novels to demonstrate their complex representations of conjugal relationships as they are threatened by secret vivisectionist practices conducted apart from, or buried deep within, the domestic sphere.

<5>This is a compelling, cogent, and self-assured book – offering fresh and intelligent readings of the nineteenth-century novel, impressively handling of a wide range of scholarship from literary and history-of-science studies, sensitive to the difficulties of its arguments and yet always insightful and provocative. Whether or not DeWitt’s methods for reading the relationships between nineteenth-century literary and scientific texts will be taken up by other scholars, this book poses an important set of questions to a scholarly field currently in the process of methodological redefinition, and provides some strong and intriguing answers of its own.

#### Endnotes

(1)George Levine, *Realism, Ethics, and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).[\(^\)](#)