

Rethinking George Eliot's Later Life

[*George Eliot in Society: Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory*](#). Kathleen McCormack.
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<1>In *George Eliot in Society*, Kathleen McCormack sets out to correct the received image of George Eliot in two ways: by focusing on the latter portion of the author's life and by insisting that Eliot was not excluded from full participation in Victorian society because of her atypical marital status. Both Victorian and modern critics have tended to be fascinated with the period that surrounded Eliot's choice to live with the married George Henry Lewes. Biographies, "both long and short, have paid most attention to her early years, especially the period leading up to her momentous decision and the time immediately following when she began her career as a fiction writer" (3). This focus leads naturally to the image of Eliot as a recluse, whose quasi-married state becomes central to how we conceive her life. McCormack chooses to resist this pattern. Paying almost no attention to Eliot's early years, she turns instead to the period between 1865 and 1880 when Eliot's fame led her to become increasingly involved in travel abroad and in hosting salons at home. Meticulously researching Eliot's and Lewes's journals and letters, as well as the letters and memoirs of the people who attended the salons at the Priory, McCormack proves that Eliot and Lewes were not reclusive but instead actively engaged in a public social life that involved women and married couples as much as male intellectuals.

<2>Chapters Two and Three deal with the two venues in which Eliot and Lewes most frequently socialized: their travels in Europe and the Sunday gatherings they held at their house in St. John's Wood. Both venues had a cosmopolitan focus. Enjoying their encounters abroad and with an extensive knowledge of European culture, Eliot and Lewes consciously sought to model the social gatherings they orchestrated in England on the tradition of salons like those Madame de Recamier held in the early years of the nineteenth century, which famously attracted French intellectuals. Eliot turned increasingly to both travel and entertaining after her early success with *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1860-61). Taking their first trip to Italy in 1860 in part as an occasion to do research for *Romola* (1862-63), Eliot and

Lewes “established their routine of visiting European spas” (37) in 1866. During this period, Eliot also became interested in poetry, writing both “The Spanish Gypsy” (1868) and the long poem “Agatha” (1869), which McCormack convincingly shows to have been based on Eliot and Lewes’s travels in Sankt Märgen, Germany. This interest in poetry reemerges in the first of the Sundays at the Priory. There, on February 14, 1869, Robert Browning held forth on versification, having recently published his novel in verse *The Ring and the Book* (1868). That discussion paralleled Eliot’s own interest as articulated in essays of the period: “Notes on Form in Art” (1868) and “On Versification” (1869).

<3>As Browning’s inaugural discussion makes clear, the salons were both social and literary affairs. People from different aspects of the publishing world met one another at the Eliot and Lewes gatherings, doing business as well as entertaining each other. As Eliot returned to writing novels in the late 1860s, Lewes used the salons to foster his “innovative plan of publishing *Middlemarch* in its own volumes issued serially during 1871 and 1872 as a revolutionary strategy that helped weaken the dominance of officious lending libraries” (75). Having Eliot read aloud from sections of *Middlemarch* at the Priory gatherings stimulated interest and led the book to be reviewed as it was coming out. The success of *Middlemarch* (1871-72) also “swelled attendance at Sundays at the Priory. It clinched George Eliot’s celebrity and brought increasingly large parties of guests to St. John’s Wood, so that the years between *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* became the heyday of the Lewes’s Sunday salons” (77). As Eliot’s fame increased so did the social status of the author, the characters she depicted in her fiction, and the people who attended her salons.

<4>During the mid-1870s, the gatherings at the Priory became increasingly international and elaborate. They included formal musical performances by singers like Pauline Viardot, the mezzo-soprano who traveled with both her husband and Ivan Turgenev, George du Maurier, who, though well-known as an author, had a professional quality singing voice, Anthony Trollope’s niece Beatrice, and Phoebe Sarah Marks. The latter two were both taken to be models for Mirah Lapidoth in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), in many ways the guiding text for *George Eliot in Society*. That novel leads McCormack to focus on spas like Baden Baden, so famously depicted in the opening of Eliot’s novel. The musical side of the entertainments at the Priory makes them models for the scenes that run through *Daniel Deronda* in which characters perform publically. Emphasizing that that novel includes characters of the highest rank of any depicted in Eliot’s fiction, McCormack also shows that, at the period of Eliot’s greatest fame she was far from being ostracized from Society with a capital S. Members of the gentry, both men and women, frequently visited the Priory. McCormack reads two of those visitors, Lady Castledown and her daughter Cecilia Wingfield, who also traveled with Eliot and Lewes in Germany, as models for Gwendolyn Harleth and her mother.

<5>At the end of Chapter Five, McCormack charts the lives of the various gay and lesbian guests who attended the salon. In Chapter Six she notes the psychologists who began to come to the Sunday gatherings in the mid-1870s, perhaps in honor of Lewes's *The Problems of Life and Mind*, volumes of which appeared from the mid to late 1870s. Here we see the full value of *George Eliot in Society*, which charts the changing complexion of a literary and social group that kept meeting in different forms over an almost ten year period, from its beginnings in 1869 to Lewes's death in 1878. In McCormack's penultimate chapter one feels her impulse to move out from the book's focus on Eliot as she tells mini-biographies of the various people who attended the gatherings at the Priory and what happened to them after Lewes's and Eliot's deaths. In the end, the meticulous research that went into *George Eliot in Society* does more than revise our view of Eliot, it allows us to explore the changing dynamics of a specific venue for Victorian public intellectual life. As a result the book will be interesting to scholars of Trollope and Browning, or Charles Darwin and Alexander Bain, as well as to those studying Eliot. It paints a picture of an amazing range of intellectual and artistic lives that intersected at the nexus provided by Eliot and Lewes. In this vein, I found the last chapter of the book, with its discussions of whether John Cross jumped into the Venetian Canal on his honeymoon, less interesting than the rest of the book. It is focused too narrowly on purely biographical events. What makes *George Eliot in Society* compelling is its map of the intellectual cross currents that made Eliot's life so much more fascinatingly public than we tend to conceive it.