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The Awkward Blot: George Eliot's Reception and The Ideal Woman Writer⁽¹⁾

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<1> Discrepancies between the life and novels of George Eliot have proven paradoxical throughout her critical history. Eliot's moral choices disturbed her contemporary readership and posthumous biographers; like Mary Wollstonecraft, whose failure to adhere to codes of sexual behavior excluded her from public discourse, Eliot faced censure for her personal life. Her actions clashed with her novels' clear awareness of the dangers to women who ignored or subverted rules of acceptable female conduct. Second-wave feminists of the twentieth century faced a similar frustration of being unable to reconcile public expression with private decision; they angrily regretted Eliot's refusal to allow her heroines the freedom from proscriptive social behavior that she had apparently claimed for herself. By juxtaposing Eliot's critical reception in these two periods (the mid-to-late nineteenth century and the early 1970s), I will demonstrate that these two sets of readers shared an interpretative framework: the belief that the literary *and* personal experiences of a woman writer should exemplify current standards of female behavior.

<2> In the 1970s, this binary interpretation of Eliot—is she, are her novels, feminist or not?—revealed anxieties about the roles of women which paralleled historical changes in Anglo-American feminism, particularly reflected in women's increasing participation in higher education. Over the next forty years, feminist critics continued to express concerns about Eliot's approach to issues of gender, but their analytical positions widened into more complex analyses of what feminism and womanhood meant to Eliot, and how her position(s) can be placed in modern feminist criticism. The question “is she feminist?” continues to be asked, but no longer plays the central role in critical interpretations. Because of this, reflection on its previous importance allows us to question Eliot's place in future feminist scholarship.

<3> From the first hints that Marian Evans had written the fiction of George Eliot, her readers balanced opinions about her intellectual ideas and her personal history, reflecting the importance of morality as the lynch-pin of public behavior and the literary marketplace. Elizabeth Gaskell, already established as a writer of solidly moral novels, used her biography of Charlotte Brontë (1857) to demonstrate the need for moral rectitude in women writers. Gaskell's depiction of Brontë foregrounds the importance of the nature of the woman over the literary accomplishments of the author. Although she admonishes the talented woman writer not to “hide her gift in a napkin” (*Life* 334), Gaskell describes the Brontë sisters standing before God “as authors as well as women” (*Life* 335), thus offering a strictly female version of authorship: Brontë's greatness as a writer remaining secondary to her dutiful performance as daughter and caretaker. When presented with George Eliot in 1859, Gaskell needed to appraise a woman whose greatness in fiction had seemingly been accomplished at the expense of her femininity: “Miss Evans' life taken at the best construction, does so jar against the beautiful book” (*Letters* 566). Her vacillation between respect for the novel and concerned censure for the author, as expressed in letters written in the autumn of 1859, echoes a larger question: how could a woman who had lost her belief in Christianity write a novel that had been widely believed the work of a clergyman?

<4> Gaskell's reception of George Eliot consciously constructs George Eliot by acknowledging, and making allowances for, a perceived difference in the positions taken in her life and her work. Gaskell chose to foreground the morality demonstrated in Eliot's novels, treating her personal choices as aberrations expressed by a fundamentally virtuous character: “I would rather they [*Adam Bede* and *Scenes of Clerical Life*] had not been written by Miss Evans, it is true; but justice should be done to all; & after all the writing such a book should raise her in every one's opinion, because no dramatic power would, I think enable her to think & say such *noble* things, unless her own character—perhaps somewhere hidden away from our sight at present,—has such possibilities of greatness and goodness in it” (*Letters* 903). Morality could not be portrayed if it were not innate, no matter how strong the intellectual power of the writer. As a result, Gaskell—clearly aware of the implications to her own moral respectability in her acceptance of Eliot—concludes that “I think the author must be a noble creature: and I shut my eyes to the awkward

blot in her life” (*Letters* 594).

<5> Eliot, aware that this “awkward blot” would affect her public reception, understood the fate of Mary Wollstonecraft, whose writings were expunged from early-to-mid-nineteenth-century public discourse because of the irregularities of her personal life. Even feminists of the period refused to claim Wollstonecraft as an ideological predecessor; Barbara Caine argues that even to cite her as influential risked creating “connections between personal and sexual revolt on the one hand and feminist conviction on the other” (262). As a result, references to Wollstonecraft before the late 1870s are found almost entirely in private writings⁽²⁾ —with the notable exception of Eliot’s own essay “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft” (1855).⁽³⁾ Eliot’s description of *Rights of Woman* as worthy of attention—“severely moral,” even—in spite of its bad reputation, may well have been an attempt to justify her own existence as a writer whose public life had the potential to obliterate her career (201). According to Kathleen McCormack, Eliot was reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* after her return to England with George Henry Lewes—a time when she herself felt “constant humiliation and rejection” for her decision to live with a married man (612). Eliot could not ignore the possibility that her own writing might be similarly erased.

<6> Eliot’s justification of her relationship with Lewes, expressed in an 1857 letter to her brother’s solicitor, reflects the textual interpretations that would later save her from Wollstonecraft’s fate (and to reclaim Wollstonecraft from it). She states that, regardless of the legal realities of the situation, Marian Lewes is no illicit mistress; although her letter acknowledges that the “marriage is not a legal one,” she emphasizes that “it is regarded by us both as a sacred bond” (*Letters* 2: 349). She claims her status as wife, down to her symbolic acceptance of Lewes’ name, and implies that their commitment to marriage indicates the true purpose of their relationship. Wollstonecraft’s rehabilitation, which began in the 1870s, also stemmed from a reinterpretation of her motivations on these grounds. In 1879, Charles Kegan Paul claimed that political expediency caused Wollstonecraft to live with Gilbert Imlay without marrying him, rather than any wish on her part to reject social mores. Although Joanne Shattock states that Kegan Paul “adopted a line which was to become the orthodox view, adopted by subsequent biographers—that an official or public marriage in the Paris of that day would have put her life at risk, and that they were ‘married’ in all save a ceremony” (17), Godwin had in fact taken this “line” in 1798, indicating that the changes occurred not in the facts, but in their interpretation. Kegan Paul argues that Wollstonecraft *believed* herself to be married, and that such a commitment exonerated her from charges of willful immorality: “She believed that his love, which was to her sacred, would endure. No one can read her letters without seeing that she was a pure-high-minded, and refined woman, and that she considered herself, in the eyes of God and man, Imlay’s wife” (756). If anything, Kegan Paul argues, Wollstonecraft suffered from excessive femininity, a nature too much in need of love to be overly concerned with external social forms. Millicent Garrett Fawcett’s 1891 description of Wollstonecraft as “the essentially womanly woman” (23), compared with previous accusations of “hyena in petticoats,” indicates that the revised construction of Wollstonecraft cast her as an ideal woman.

<7> Nineteenth-century biographers of George Eliot took a similar approach when faced with the need to praise her work while not condoning the most notable element of her private life—a particularly difficult task as, without Lewes, there would have been no George Eliot to praise. Biographies of George Eliot in this period can be loosely divided into three categories: John Cross’ *George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, reminiscences written by people who knew her, and formal biographies which provide a coherent overview of George Eliot’s life and career. All of these forms acknowledge the relationship of Eliot and Lewes in such a way as to actively construct George Eliot’s life into a form which the biographer finds acceptable. Examples from each of these categories indicate the ways in which interpreting Eliot within codes of acceptable conduct became an essential element of her reception.

<8> Cross’s *Life* is perceptively described by Rosemarie Bodenheimer as “the official portrait of an idealized figure” (4), and this idealization emerges particularly well in the portrayal of the relationship between Eliot and Lewes. Although Cross recognizes this relationship as the most important element of Eliot’s life, he portrays it through a notably scanty set of documentary materials, including a letter written over a year after their elopement. A contemporary reviewer approved of such reticence, stating that Cross “has got himself out of a difficult situation very well” (qtd. in Carroll 486); from the beginning of Eliot’s biographical reception, then, it was recognized that interpreting the relationship would be problematic. In their edition of Eliot’s journals, Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston note Cross’s “obsessive” removal of references, such as the plural possessive in the statement “Fixed on our lodgings at East Sheen” (xxii).

Although Cross claimed that “The life has been allowed to write itself” (v), his textual manipulation undermines the relationship by excluding Lewes wherever possible, and as a result provides an arguably misleading construction of George Eliot.

<9> Both memoirs and formal biographies face more squarely the issue of Eliot’s personal life, taking a firm stance that the “awkward blot” resulted from a womanly nature.(4) Charles Bray, in his 1884 autobiography, judged that George Eliot “was of a most affectionate disposition, always requiring some one to lean upon....She was not fitted to stand alone” (75).(5) This theme became part of the biographical tradition; six years later, Oscar Browning echoed Bray in his *Life of George Eliot*, announcing “it was a true marriage” (38) and defining Eliot’s choice as a manifestation of “a nature which needed some one to lean upon” (39). Adherence to this “evaluation” of Eliot reduces her, as it did Wollstonecraft, to a narrow identity which defines her as a *woman* writer—particularly notable in biographies such as Browning’s, where Lewes becomes responsible for the writings of George Eliot: “Without his insight into literary faculty, and his sustaining sympathy, it is doubtful whether she would have produced the writings which have made her fame” (39). Without being so womanly as to choose a life with George Lewes over social respectability, this argument insists, the woman could never have been a writer.

<10> Alison Booth, writing about the collective biographies of women, discusses “role model biography” as a category which “claims to reproduce copies of appropriate originals” (“Lessons” 263). Eliot’s inclusion and treatment in late-Victorian biographies demonstrates that in order for her to be considered “appropriate,” her actions needed to be justified within an acceptable category. In Catherine J. Hamilton’s 1893 collection of biographies of women writers, the author refuses to condone Eliot’s relationship. “We, who hold the sanctity of marriage, cannot excuse such a union,” she notes, allowing no choice but that her readers will join her in this condemnation (232). However, she takes great pains to justify how Eliot could have chosen this role without compromising her womanhood. She appeals to Eliot’s essential femininity, such as her maternal instincts, only to turn around and reject that femininity entirely. (Both Hamilton and Kegan Paul give the sense of breathlessly piling one justification on top of another, as if to provide the reader with as many reasons for mercy as possible.) Hamilton’s most compelling argument is that which Eliot herself provided: she considered herself Lewes’ wife. She adds to this the fact that Lewes’ sons accepted her as a mother. As occurred with critical views on Wollstonecraft’s “marriage” to Imlay, such an assertion could spurn accusations that a woman had deliberately rejected the legal bond of marriage; instead, she had kept faith with the spirit of marriage. Although Hamilton focuses on Eliot’s career, she needed to explain why Eliot could be included in a collection of essays which praises Mrs. Gaskell not only for novels but for a “peculiar tact in training her servants” (171).

<11> In contrast, Mathilde Blind’s 1883 biography had offered a much less apologetic examination, indicating that Hamilton’s method of explanation was not the only way to recast Eliot’s choice. Mathilde Blind’s analysis is much less concerned with moral condemnation, instead attempting to provide an objective explanation: “A crisis was now impending in Marian’s life. She was called upon to make her private judgment a law unto herself, and to shape her actions, not according to the recognised moral standard of her country, but in harmony with her own convictions of right and wrong” (85). This explanation, which could equally apply to Lewes’ situation, claims that Eliot’s choice was not the result of being overwhelmed by her feminine nature but rather an autonomous decision. Blind does, however, share with Hamilton a concern for the damage done to George Eliot *as a woman*, and so returns to the core of female identity. She hints, for example, that a closer adherence to the requirements of society might have reduced the resultant pain: “George Eliot must have undergone some trials and sufferings peculiarly painful to one so shrinkingly sensitive as herself. Conscious of no wrong-doing, enjoying the rare happiness of completest intellectual fellowship in the man she loved, the step she had taken made a gap between her kindred and herself which could not but gall her clinging, womanly nature” (87). These and other “role model biographies,” concerned with edification, interpreted George Eliot within a category that they were themselves constructing.

<12> The figure of George Eliot was incorporated into late-Victorian arguments about femininity, but although the New Woman movement might have embraced her as a foremother, her reception was far more ambiguous. Eliza Lynn Linton, whose early appreciation of Mary Wollstonecraft quickly faded in favor of denouncing “The Girl of the Period” and the “Shrieking Sisterhood,” openly admired George Eliot’s bravery: “Her devoted attitude during George Lewes’s lifetime stood in lieu of the marriage ceremony; and her genius set the seal to the association” (102-03). Yet Linton’s New Woman novels stand as ambivalent responses to the Woman Question: she

For Elton's New Woman novels stand as ambivalent responses to the Woman Question, she allows her heroines to become public speakers and Girton girls, but punishes some for their rejection of domesticity while allowing others to triumph at the expense of the mild, sweet English girls she claimed to be upholding. (6) Even New Woman novels which provided a principled rejection of marriage, such as Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* (1894), stopped far short of condoning adultery, or offering a George Eliot figure as heroine. Clear echoes of George Eliot can be found within New Woman fiction; Mona Caird's *The Wing of Azrael* (1889), for instance, provides a scene of a young unmarried couple in a boat which appears to be a reworking of Maggie Tulliver's experience. The strength of Eliot's personal authority in this period has been discussed by Elaine Showalter, who in "The Greening of Sister George" (1980) demonstrates that New Women writers frequently felt "a sense of belatedness and artistic inadequacy" at her literary greatness (293). In spite of this influence, however, the new potential for womanhood offered by the *fin de siècle* failed to use Eliot as the model for a revisioning of the modern woman.

<13> George Eliot's construction as an acceptable (if not wholly ideal) woman writer occurred because her obvious understanding and acceptance of morality, demonstrated by her novels, provided a context within which her personal actions could be interpreted. That she might have chosen to live a life in conformity with social rules and her personal beliefs, but did not, meant that her readers either had to reject her as a woman writer or accept her anomalies while not seeming to condone her choices. The nature of womanhood remained superior to intellectual offerings, and thus Eliot had to be interpreted as having been loyal to her feminine nature, erring only in the intensity of her devotion.

<14> Second-wave feminists claimed Eliot during their overhaul of the male-dominated literary canon, but many Anglo-American critics of the early 1970s found the life-work discrepancy difficult to accept. For feminists, particularly those taking the approach described by Toril Moi as "Images of Woman" criticism, in which "the act of reading is seen as a communication between the life ('experience') of the author and the life of the reader" (43), the personal and the political had fused. Feminist critics challenged male-dominated New Criticism, which emphasized "a steady, detailed reading of the text in isolation from outside influences such as the author's life, historical and political events, and our own responses as readers"—with those texts inevitably written by dead white men (Kaplan 38). Personal reading of woman-authored texts became a political act, allowing the reader and the author to meet on a deeply intimate level by sharing the text as a conduit, and acknowledging as valid the experience of both women who participated in the connection.

<15> Eliot might have been interpreted as a woman writer who had successfully fought patriarchal Victorian rules that would have denied her happiness. Such a portrait would have made her a feminist heroine. That she upheld in her fiction "the confines of ordinary possibility, confines from which the author had, by means of her writing, escaped" made her, instead, a betrayer (Beer 3). Kate Millett, in *Sexual Politics*, (7) argued that George Eliot failed to incorporate her experience into her work; although she "lived the revolution," in her fiction she "stuck with the Ruskinian service ethic and the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman who...rescues the fallen man" (139). Feminist readers who attached themselves emotionally to Eliot's heroines could only condemn Eliot for repeatedly cutting them down. Lee R. Edwards discusses in a 1972 essay how she felt herself a kind of Dorothea Brooke, "a cygnet among ducklings, passionately looking for the great river whose current would carry me to others of my kind" (230). Such identification clearly informs Edwards' statement that women readers "wait, almost desperately, for the author's imagination to divine a world whose shadowy existence we have long suspected, but whose reality has been perpetually denied" (232). *Middlemarch* provides no such reward, however. Eliot's novels offered heroines who, according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, viewed themselves "not as Milton but only as one of Milton's dutiful daughters" (451). The characters were trapped in the same bonds of "ideal" feminine behavior as their twentieth-century readers.

<16> Such a situation, for the reading feminist, offered little alternative to the works provided by New Criticism; these readers wanted novels which showed "the search for an emancipated self" (Furman 62). Reading about a heroine such as Dorothea, who uses "her ardent nature, her intelligence, her desire not simply to be good but to discover what might be good in order to use the fruits of this discovery to change the world" (Edwards 232), the personal and political combining to provide complete fulfillment, and then discovering that her author "gently mocks" her, causes Edwards to feel personally deceived, both as a reader identifying with Dorothea and as a feminist seeking alternative roles (233). Even Dorothea herself can be interpreted as a protest against Eliot's hypocrisy; Millett argues that her "judgment in *Middlemarch* is an eloquent plea

against Eliot's hypocrisy, which argues that her predicament in *Middlemarch* is an eloquent plea that a fine mind be allowed an occupation; but it goes no farther than petition" (139). When feminists sought connections between themselves and their literature, they discovered that not only were George Eliot's characters insufficient role models, but that the author herself stood in their way. One slightly less angry response, a 1972 collaborative annotated bibliography, takes the view that Eliot's "philosophy did not seek to change the limited opportunities open to women, but rather to 'understand' women's reality in Middlemarch society"; to read the novel as a sociological text makes it "helpful in reconstructing the history of western women," another important goal of the feminist movement (Cornillon 359). Such an interpretation indicates that Eliot's work did find acceptance in feminist circles. However, feminist critics remained disappointed when they wanted to see their searches for emancipation reflected in Eliot's work, as much as—perhaps even more than—her own.

<17> The reasons behind such a passionate rejection of George Eliot is not mere pique. Essay after essay about the realities of second-wave feminism, in collections such as *Images of Women in Fiction* (1972) and *Changing Subjects: The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (1993), reveal the experiences of female graduate students who accepted as normal (or fumed about silently) that they would be taught canonical male authors by male professors using the tenets of New Criticism, passed over by hiring committees in favor of male candidates, required to give up their own careers if their husbands relocated, and expected to accept all of this as the way things were. Even women who incorporated women writers into their dissertations or postdoctoral work were subjected to what Ann Rosalind Jones described as "academic schizophrenia" (71). The women who sat in classrooms found no connections with the texts they interpreted there. Nancy Burr Evans found that women writers (rather than her male professors) reassured her of the value of such a personal approach to literature. In retrospect, Evans offers a caution about reading so intensely and intimately: "the reading of women writers can be destructive, pathetically counterproductive if not tempered with critical judgment" (311). Yet with so few women writers represented in English Literature during this period, female scholars naturally demanded "their" writing, rejecting the position placed upon them by the male-dominated academy. Toril Moi cautions that we should not blame these critics, though they may seem naive, for their "insistence on the *political* nature of any critical discourse, and their will to take historical and sociological factors into account" formed the basis of today's more sophisticated approaches (49). However, their insistence on personal reactions to women writers falls along the same lines as what Victorian readers demanded: an exemplar for thought and life, available in both fictional and biographical form.

<18> By 1976, there had been so much resentment that Zelda Austen meta-critically addressed the topic "Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot":

The feminist critic calls for a literature that will show women active rather than docile, aggressive and ambitious rather than retiring and submissive, successful in forging their way through the world as heroes are, rather than content to be chosen by successful men. They desire to see other alternatives open to women than the extreme poles of courtship, marriage, and children on the one hand or disgrace, suffering, and death on the other. The particular anger against George Eliot rises from her failure to allow this freedom for her heroines even though she achieved it herself. (117)

The feminist critic depicted by Austen demanded that her literature provide role models who offered support, encouragement, and the promise of success—even if this meant transcending the cultural values of its own time. Nancy Burr Evans explains that women wanted to find companionship with characters who were also experiencing isolation; to move beyond identification and into action, however, the role models themselves had to struggle. For Eliot to have a place in the feminist canon, her novel had to be acceptable as a personal manifesto. Feminist critics were angry with George Eliot because they felt she offered only a reflection of the same unsavory choices in which gifted women remained subordinate to male writers and intellectuals. That Eliot had done this while herself flying in the teeth of Victorian social mores seemed deceptive—breaking faith with her own gender by appropriating the codes of the other.

<19> With feminist struggle came a greater self-awareness; with success came a wider scope. As feminism changed, personal identification with women writers was discovered to be a problematic means of liberation. "Feminism happened when women learned to say 'I,'" claims Gayle Greene, but as time went on, "we've realized the limits of that 'I' and 'we'; contemporary

theory has rendered suspect the view of personal experience as a site of authoritative discourse” (“Looking at History” 11). Feminist readers who had learned to say “I” also claimed a “we” that included fictional characters and their creators. Once the empowerment provided by this shared “we” became more complex—and when feminism itself realized that it had a diversity of goals—fiction no longer needed to provide the primary source of identification. Undergraduates continue to have fits over Maggie’s death(8) and graduate students still regret that Dorothea Brooke never achieved the success of George Eliot, but feminist concepts of the ideal woman writer now uphold authors who acknowledged the complexities and ambiguities of their female characters.

<20> Criticism on Eliot in the 1980s continued to use feminism as a definition; in Carol A. Martin’s “George Eliot: Feminist Critic” (1984), the author argues that in order to locate Eliot’s feminism, “one need only examine her critical approach to women writers and works about women and compare this with her fictional practice” (22). However, critics also began to acknowledge that Eliot’s earlier, negative reception was partly due to a failure to look closely at her approach to gender. The “traditional” modes of womanly behavior that she allegedly perpetuated began to be viewed as astute analyses of the position of women. Gillian Beer wrote in 1986 that, late in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke is “financially independent, with altruistic projects, having renounced Will as unworthy” (49). Eliot could have concluded the novel at this point; that she did not indicates that she has not reached the end of Dorothea’s story. Beer places the novel’s conclusion within a framework which upholds sexual love as essential for fulfilled women. While this may seem a sad trade-off to many readers, it indicates that Eliot incorporated sexuality into her discussions of women’s fulfillment and happiness. Moreover, Beer notes that Dorothea “grows out of her belief that men father knowledge, are its origin and its guardian” (173)—precisely what feminists trained in New Criticism were themselves attempting.

<21> In the 1990s, critics began to incorporate the argument “Eliot is/is not a feminist” into broader examinations of her theories. Nancy L. Paxton, in her 1991 work on the relationship between George Eliot and evolutionary science, claims feminist leanings for Eliot in order “to establish the grounds of Eliot’s resistance to evolutionary interpretations of biological difference” (13), while in *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women’s Fiction* (1996), Susan Meyer uses feminism as one element of bridging the notorious schism between the stories of Gwendolen Harleth and Daniel Deronda: “The novel ultimately does with the Jews, the opposing race with its submerged connection to female rebelliousness against social constraints, precisely what it does with female rebellion: it firmly ushers both out of the English world of the novel” (162). The clearest sign of the progression of feminist criticism came when it began questioning the limitations of its own past. Mark Turner and Caroline Levine, in their guest-edited issue of *Women’s Writing* (1996), explicitly present their theme—“Gender, Genre and George Eliot”—as a way to “broaden the debate about Eliot and gender, to move beyond the task of establishing Eliot definitively as either feminist or anti-feminist” (95). Their diverse explorations include Sherri Catherine Smith’s arguments for Eliot’s masculine self-positioning, “to show how Eliot’s identification with men should be regarded as an outgrowth of feminism at the same time it appears to be—and perhaps is—a rejection of it” (199), and Alexis Easley’s arguments that Eliot deliberately manipulated the concept of the gendered authorial voice, in a time when “defining and delimiting the role of the ‘female author’ became a major critical preoccupation” (145). Alison Booth, in *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (1992), claims for both of her authors “traditional feminism, with its longing for an essential, self-sacrificial woman” (ix), but acknowledges the discrepancies in such a statement; more importantly, Booth looks back to the early needs of feminist criticism and offers a way to move forward: “If, moreover, we can laugh off our inclination to rescue work—that is, our desire to rescue women writers of the past for feminist respectability in the manner of genteel Victorians redeeming women of the streets—we may be able to reinterpret women’s literary history and the history of feminist thought, reshaping it for purposes defined as ‘respectable’ or worthwhile in our day” (22). By placing feminist criticism itself under scrutiny, Booth offers a way for Eliot to play a key role while releasing her from the obligation to meet specific requirements in order to fulfil a position as feminist heroine.

<22> Whether this challenge has been met is not clear. Feminist research on Eliot—work which defines itself in its title or main thesis as “feminist”—has slowed to a crawl. Only a handful of recent articles can be found in databases and annual bibliographies, and the subject is further damned by *Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot* and *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, neither of which, in their overviews of Eliot’s relationship with gender and feminism, offer any major source dating after 1990.(9) Moreover, feminist-oriented criticism published in the past few years hints that the field may simultaneously be moving forward and

doubling back on itself. “The Politics of ‘Presence’ and ‘Difference’: Working Through Spinoza and Eliot,” an essay published in a collection of feminist legal theory articles (2001), uses *Daniel Deronda* in an examination of “the challenges arising from the politics of embodiment, identity and difference” (Gatens 159), removing Eliot’s ideas from a literary realm into a philosophical one; the use of feminism in her work has here moved into an ultra-theoretical form. Kimberly VanEsveld Adams, in her work on the use of the Madonna figure (2001), does return to the argument of whether George Eliot and other nineteenth-century writers “were ‘feminists,’ and what kind of feminist each might be” (144), indicating that this issue of definition and codification has not vanished. However, in general, Eliot’s feminist credentials and the way she expressed them in her novels have become less important as an interpretive tool. This strongly implies that questions about Eliot’s status as a feminist are the result of instability in the social framework rather than straightforward attempts at literary analysis; this article is, after all, as much a narrative about the development of feminist literary criticism as it is a discussion of the critical reception of George Eliot’s fiction. Yet even as the ‘was she/wasn’t she’ question fades, the disjunction of her life and work remains unresolved: why didn’t Dorothea Brooke write *Middlemarch*?

<23> By rejecting the demand that authorial intention must uphold the social and cultural concept of womanhood,⁽¹⁰⁾ Eliot offers a new interpretation of the ideal woman writer. Her revision cautions us that when we attempt to define this figure, we must be wary of constructing an identity which is restricted to the dominant ideologies of our own historical moment. Instead, she suggests a corrective, in which art provides not dogmatically-correct role models but the capacity to understand differences: “the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures” (*Letters* 3: 111). In achieving this, Eliot sought to construct a role in which her identity as a woman, as a writer, and as a “struggling erring human” became an integral part of her ability to examine “the formation of gender characteristics by community, by expectations, and by ideological pressures” (Flint 163). By providing both a critical view of the social construction of women, and a chance for her readers to connect emotionally with her characters, Eliot offers the opportunity to reflect deeply on how women view each other and themselves.

Endnotes

(1)For their assistance and advice, I would like to thank Aileen Christianson, Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, and Sally Mitchell. For their helpful editorial feedback, I would like to thank Ken Newton and the anonymous readers of this journal.(△)

(2)Janet Todd’s annotated bibliography of works by and about Wollstonecraft finds such her mentioned in the biographies and memoirs of William Befoe (1817), William Ellery Channing (1848), Benjamin Silliman (1866), and Harriet Martineau (1877). As an adolescent, probably around 1819, Elizabeth Barrett read *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and responded passionately to its arguments: “I read Mary Wolstonecraft [sic] when I was thirteen—no, // twelve! . . . and, through the whole course of my childhood, I had a steady indignation against Nature who made me a woman” (125-26).(△)

(3)The other essay on Wollstonecraft published at this time was Eliza Lynn Linton’s “Mary Wollstonecraft” (1854).(△)

(4)Edith J. Simcox’s *Autobiography of a Shirtmaker* ignores the issue completely. However, this work was a personal diary rather than an intended public memoir, and would therefore not have needed the same level of justification. Simcox does not seem to have been entirely happy with Lewes when they first met, as she appears surprised five years later to find that “I think I have made my peace with Mr. Lewes” (42); however, given her worship of George Eliot, it is difficult to imagine Simcox being critical of anything her heroine might have done.(△)

(5)Dorothea Barrett notes that Bray’s “evaluation has been absorbed...into almost every major document of George Eliot scholarship”, including Gordon Haight’s biography, in which these words become “a kind of refrain” (8).(△)

(6)For the former, see *In Haste and at Leisure* (1895), in which a strident pro-suffrage speaker learns too late that she has lost the joys of marriage through her insistence of competing with men

in the public sphere . A far more ambivalent construction is found in Linton's *The One 100 Many* (1894); the protagonist, Moira, is ostensibly the epitome of English womanhood, but drowns herself at the end of the novel after her husband finds a Girton girl more to his liking, for being able to discuss the intellectual ideas of which she has remained ignorant.(^)

(7)Published in 1977, it was written earlier in the decade as her doctoral thesis.(^)

(8)With thanks to Sally Mitchell for a well-turned phrase.(^)

(9)Kate Flint's essay "George Eliot and Gender" in the *Cambridge Companion* (2001) discusses "George Eliot's continual interest in the formation of gender characteristics by community, by expectations, and by ideological pressures" as crucial elements of her fiction and feminism (163), and provides an excellent and detailed analysis of these issues in Eliot's work. This is, however, fundamentally a review essay rather than a new interpretation of Eliot's work from a feminist perspective.(^)

(10)I am borrowing ideas from an article by Bonnie Zimmerman, in which she reflects on how her personal experience as "a lesbian feminist literary critic" combines her professional career (including a dissertation on George Eliot) with her personal response to the work (118).(^)

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