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## George Eliot's Serial Fiction

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**Mark W. Turner**  
*George Eliot's Serial Fiction* by Carol A. Martin  
(Ohio State University Press, 1994)

In the past few years, there has been considerable renewed interest in serial literature in the form of single author and general studies. Martin's book on Eliot takes its place alongside works such as Mary Hamer's book on Trollope, *Writing by Numbers* (1987), Hughes's and Lund's *The Victorian Serial* (1991), and Harris's and Myers's (eds.) *Serials and Their Readers* (1993). Martin's study focuses on Eliot's four full-length serializations of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in *Blackwood's Magazine*, *Romola* in *Cornhill Magazine*, and *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in part-issue, and provides a publishing and writing history of each. Her analysis uses Eliot's letters and journals as a way of demonstrating how the author utilized the serial form as a way of constructing her narratives. Martin provides a number of insights into serial narratives, such as the need for a contained structure within each instalment, and addresses the question of the reader and the text through her exhaustive research of the reviews and through adopting a type of reader-response criticism.

The book opens with a brief overview of serialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and addresses questions of form and structure in dealing with publication in parts. Unfortunately, Martin relies heavily on R. M. Wiles's 1957 book on serialization and misses the opportunity to reconsider the whole notion of serialization in light of more recent scholarship and theoretical work, the result being that much of this chapter seems both familiar and under-developed in places. For example, in discussing the author-public relationship in serials, Martin asserts that an 'intimacy sometimes led the public to see themselves as co-authors...' (26). This presents an opportunity to consider the whole vexed question of authorship and *authority* in serial texts, and how this publication form dictates or perhaps negotiates with categories such as the author and the book.

The chapters on the individual works are long and thorough, but because Martin relies heavily on *The George Eliot Letters* to provide a unified narrative of the writing of the serials, she repeats well-known information (such as Eliot's anonymous status as author of *Scenes*) without interrogating it further. Unnecessarily, Martin fabricates a sense of unity where it does not need to exist. One of the problems with focusing on a single author in discussing serials is that the figure of the author can end up providing a sense of unity, an unsatisfactory concept for the serial form which is based on fragmentation in all sorts of ways. In her discussion of *Scenes*, we are told that place unifies the text, as the Pickwick Club does in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* or as place and character do in Gaskell's *Cranford*. This may be, but perhaps it would be more interesting to read serials for the disruptions and tensions within the text. Serials are not books, so the Victorian realist serial can and should be studied without our preconceived notions about nineteenth-century realist novels which often rely on the seamlessness of volume form than on publication in parts.

Martin raises a number of important issues which need to be considered in looking at serials (such as the structuring of instalments, narrative intrusions, the problem of closure, and the role of the reader), but, again, she neglects the special conditions of existence (what Foucault would call the 'rules of formation') for the serial form as distinct from other cultural forms of literature. In one of the notes, Martin states that 'this study of George Eliot's serial fiction attempts only to suggest the context of the periodicals in which her first two serials, *Scenes* and *Romola*, appeared' (293). The problem with this approach is that by avoiding a developed discussion of the magazines, the whole dynamic of serial publication in periodicals is lost. Of course, this study is centred on Eliot's development of the serial form and the reception of her narratives in parts. But, our understanding of magazine serials depends upon our understanding of particular magazines: who read it and how was it consumed? how much did it cost? what was the editorial policy? what role did illustration have? who advertised in it?, etc. These material questions are significant because they help us to see that serial fiction was an interactive and intertextual literature which often blurred the boundaries between genre and form, and such questions would seem crucial to the sort of reader-response criticism Martin engages.

Martin's final chapter on the serial readers of *Middlemarch* and *Deronda* is the most illuminating because it is only here that interesting theoretical questions about serialization are brought to the fore. She asserts that 'these serial works prompted special discussion of issues such as the temporal dimension of literature, the problem of wholeness in a work seen initially only in parts, the pauses or blanks that this special publication format imposes on a text, and the nature of readers' interaction or entanglement with the serial text' (240). If such questions as these had formed the basis of this study, been a beginning rather than an endpoint, *George Eliot's Serial Fiction* would be a much more satisfying book. Still as a study of the way Eliot engaged with writing in such a fragmented form, the book is successful and perhaps goes some way to countering the often pronounced view that Eliot's fiction was not suited for the Victorian serial form. Martin's study brings together a great deal of useful information (especially her invaluable look at reviews – listed in an appendix), and serves to remind us of the importance of serialization as a unique cultural form and of the work that still remains to be done in this rich field.