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Review of George Eliot and Intoxication: Dangerous Drugs for the Condition of England

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**Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot and Intoxication: Dangerous Drugs for the Condition of England* (Macmillan Press, 2000). pp. 234. £42.50.
ISBN 0 333 73492 0.**

Famously insisting to her friend Barbara Bodichon that our 'highest calling' is 'to do without opium', George Eliot is not a writer whom one immediately associates with intoxication, although one of her earliest stories, 'Janet's Repentance' in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, memorably dramatizes the addictive and destructive power of alcohol in the lives of Janet and her husband, the lawyer Dempster. Kathleen McCormack's study casts its net wider than such straightforward representations of drink and drunkenness to explore the tissue of references to, and images of, intoxication, and the drugs that induce it, throughout the fiction. Intoxication, with its range of associations from poisoning to euphoria, becomes the centre of a nexus of issues relating not only to medicine and health, but also to politics, aesthetics, culture, gender, and writing itself. Drawing on Plato's *Phaedrus* through the mediation of Derrida, Kathleen McCormack shows how George Eliot subtextually or metaphorically associates writing with drugs and exploits the kill-or-cure ambiguity of the *Pharmakon* metaphor. The principal object of the intended cure is the ailing body of English society itself, and this exploration of intoxication as theme and metaphor engages repeatedly with the Condition of England itself, particularly in *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

This study is admirably ambitious in its scope, and it is illuminating to observe how pervasively the allusions to, and metaphors of, intoxication colour the fiction. In *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, we are shown how the scenes of English life are shot through with images of drugs, disease, and intoxication, whilst the Jewish sections of the novel, with the exception of Lapidoth's addiction to gambling, 'detoxify' the signifiers that are so poisonous in the English sphere and, indeed, in the earlier fiction. The earliest fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, is helpfully contextualized by contemporary evidence from an anonymous Nuneaton diarist, whose testimony lends support to George Eliot's contention, to John Blackwood, that the fictional Milby was a far pleasanter place than its heavy-drinking original. Where intoxication is explicitly an issue, as in *Scenes* or the election episodes in *Felix Holt*, the author is on firm ground, and the study is rich in illuminating details, like the association of Godfrey Cass's name in *Silas Marner* with Godfrey's Cordial, a sweetened tincture of opium that nicely conveys his inclination for wilful oblivion. But her argument becomes more speculative and less persuasive in novels like *The Mill on the Floss*. Where intoxication is not literally present, then the thesis demands that it must be implicitly so, and Mr Tulliver's litigiousness and Maggie's love for Stephen are thus interpreted as instances of addiction, of intoxication transferred from the mimetic level to the metaphorical. Similarly, Silas Marner's compulsive hoarding of money is seen as another form of addiction and brought into the orbit of intoxication. Here the central term becomes too attenuated to be useful: it is not clear how much is gained from reading these different kinds of behaviour as drug-related. On other occasions intoxication serves as a universal connective, having links in *Adam Bede*, for instance, with 'disease, language, romantic love, squandered money, and diverted descent' (77); and the juggling required to keep all these balls in the air at the same time creates a sense of strain, impeding the momentum of the argument and blurring its focus. Often the author seems to be trying to cast her net too wide and

to connect intoxication with everything: relating opium understandably enough to Orientalism, she then interprets Molly Farren's enslavement to 'demon Opium' in *Silas Marner* as metaphorically duplicating slavery in Britain's colonies and argues that this English barmaid is figured as 'Romantic, distant, diabolic and Oriental' (147). Such straining for inclusiveness is the disadvantage of this study's ambitious scope.

The chronological discussion of the fiction is framed by early chapters which helpfully distinguish between Romantic and Victorian views of intoxication and present the background of Midlands life and George Eliot's likely experience of, and reading about, intoxicating drugs (in particular her reading of Burton as well as Plato), and by an epilogue which returns intriguingly though questionably to the life of the Evans family. Noting the well-known silence of the novelist on the subject of her mother and assembling some references to drunkenness and mother-figures (such as mother Nature), Kathleen McCormack tentatively suggests that Christiana Pearson Evans might have suffered from an addiction to alcohol. There is, of course, no direct evidence and the author is circumspect in her speculation, but it is hard not to feel that the marginalized mother is now suffering an additional and undeserved humiliation. It is bad enough that George Eliot's childhood home, Griff House, is now, as the author reminds us, a Beefeater Inn: but to imagine that poor Christiana's spirit might be all too comfortably at home in the bars that have invaded the house she once kept, is to compound the insult. I cannot but believe that she is more likely to be turning in her grave than spinning on a bar stool amongst the shades of Dempster and the habitués of the Red Lion at Milby. But if these closing pages may provoke disagreement, there is much in this lively study of intoxication that will stimulate rather than upset.

John Rignall
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