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Review of Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot

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**John Rignall (ed.), *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*,
(Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. xxvi + 478. £40. ISBN 0 19 860099 2**

For a reader of George Eliot, opening this *Companion* may be a bit like opening a box of chocolates. There is a pause as one wonders where to begin, but once begun, it is difficult to stop tasting and savouring the contents. The articles are written in a fluid and concise, easily readable style, and present such an abundance and particularity of detail that the most dedicated student of George Eliot's life and work will find new information and insights. And even where the facts are more or less familiar, details we may have forgotten remind us again of the complexity and breadth of George Eliot's interests, her works, her life.

Unless one has already a specific question in mind, where and how to begin is perhaps the most difficult decision for the reader opening this book for the first time. Alphabetically? This is, coincidentally, an appropriate beginning, since the second entry under 'A' is 'Adam Bede', George Eliot's first full-length novel, and the work whose widespread critical acclaim moved her at once into the rank of the foremost novelists, as *Times* writer E. S. Dallas pointed out.

In the alphabetical mode, one might continue methodically, feasting on 'Addison, Joseph', "'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt'", 'Aeschylus', 'Agatha' (cross-referenced), 'America', and so on until one reaches the concluding page of entries, where the letters 'Y' and 'Z' (there is no X, nor, earlier, any Q), represented by 'Young, Edward' and 'Zionism', conclude the feast. There is an appropriateness too in this final entry's relationship to George Eliot's work, for Zionism (or 'Judaism', to which the reader is referred) is central to the plot of her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*.

But one is unlikely to work from A to Zed through 454 densely packed pages. Although the alphabetical approach offers a satisfying clarity to the linear mind, I found myself unable to keep to this path, preferring to sample the entries at random, until I found myself enticed into one of the meandering pathways marked by asterisked cross-references that appear so frequently to direct me to related topics. Thus, after 'Adam Bede' I had opened at random on 'Feminist criticism', and read most of that entry before being prompted by the asterisk to sample 'renunciation'. This finely detailed entry is one of the *Companion's* many cogent interpretations of George Eliot's fiction that remind the reader how her richly nuanced work defies easy categorization and simplistic generalization.

Torn between following onward to *'Goethe's notion of renunciation', and my desire to return to 'criticism, modern', of which 'Feminist criticism' had been a subtopic, I chose the latter path and, determined to stay on the straight and narrow for the nonce, I examined the several subsections of modern criticism, each by a different expert. Their concise and clear introductions to late twentieth-century critical approaches to George Eliot's work enable general readers as well as students of literary theory to get a purchase on the basics of this sometimes arcane and jargon-filled subject. Each subsection is followed by a list of seminal texts.

The copious cross-referencing encourages the reader to explore the text rather as one follows

a series of computer links. The entries incorporate both useful earlier criticism and recent analyses, and I often found some new detail on a topic with which I thought myself quite familiar. I found delightful reading in entries on George Eliot's friendships, her likes and dislikes (generally, she didn't like Americans, but did like Wagner and *some* of his music despite the impression given by Lewes's famous comment about not caring for the 'music of the future'), her opinions about earlier writers, later writers' opinions about her (Simone de Beauvoir, whose parents 'sternly scrutinized' her reading, wrote in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, that when she read *Adam Bede*, 'My heart began to pound: heaven forbid that Mama should read this book!').

Another way of working by subject is offered by the 'Classified Contents List', which is part of the prefatory matter. Here, entries are classified first in five broad areas: 'George Eliot's Life', 'George Eliot's Works', 'The Literary and Artistic Context', 'Other Contexts', and 'Reception and Aftermath'. Each is subdivided into categories such as (under 'George Eliot's works') 'Formal and thematic features of George Eliot's fiction', which includes entries titled 'beginnings of novels', 'characters, originals of', 'illustrations', and 'marriage, portrayal of'. The literary context includes subcategories on art and music, each with more than a dozen entries. Other subcategories, each with its own list of entries, include 'Feminism and the woman question', 'History, politics and society', 'Science', 'Places', and 'Adaptations of George Eliot's works', to name but a few.

On another occasion I opened by chance on 'translations by George Eliot', and then followed links to D. F. Strauss, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Baruch Spinoza (all three splendidly incisive), the first by John Rignall and the last two by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth). At first I wondered, 'why have "translations by George Eliot" at all when more thorough coverage is given under the individual authors translated?' A second thought supplied the obvious answer. If a reader is not familiar with all, or any, of the works which George Eliot translated, the general article must serve as the starting point. At the same time, as one of a few very minor quibbles with my *Companion*, I would like to have seen the dates of the translated works clearly set out in the general article as well as in the individual author entries.

One of the most important, but also most challenging tasks for editors and authors must have been how to present concisely the entries on George Eliot's other works. In terms of format, each entry on the full-length works and the novellas, 'Brother Jacob' and 'The Lifted Veil', opens on a page of its own, shaded for easy identification, and presented in a larger typeface and a single column in contrast to the double columns of other entries. The entries on the works are organized with a set sequence of sub-topics: composition, publication, illustrations (as applicable), reception, plot, and critical approaches, followed by a brief selective bibliography. These categories may have been easy to establish, but the formidable question must have been how to treat the enormous body of commentary on her works in a relatively short space. All the entries are well done, but two seem particular illustrative of the strengths of the *Oxford Companion* as a whole. John Rignall's discussion of *Silas Marner* does a splendid job in demonstrating the complexity of this short novel and the multiplicity of critical interpretations by George Eliot's contemporaries as well as by recent critical theorists. After discussing

Sandra Gilbert's feminist interpretation of the novel as an affirmation of patriarchal society, he points out that it is 'a measure of the subtlety of this apparently simple novel that it can sustain almost the opposite reading, as a text which challenges both patriarchy and conventional notions of gender' (387). In her entry on *Romola*, Margaret Harris grapples ably with a slightly different problem: how to deal with the multiplicity of responses to an obviously complex novel. She sets in context the negative responses of some of George Eliot's contemporaries and offers an incisive analysis of recent critical approaches of, among others, feminist, narratological, and deconstructionist theorists and critics. She also reminds us that important analyses of history and myth in *Romola* by Bonaparte, Bullen, and Wiesenfarth particularly have laid the groundwork for critical understanding of George Eliot's only novel to be set entirely outside England, and some 350 years earlier. Their bibliographies are relatively brief, but comprehend the most significant works on the novels. For the entry on *Middlemarch*, I would like to have seen included in the bibliography David Carroll's Introduction to the Clarendon Edition, which further develops Jerome Beaty's ground-breaking study of the *Middlemarch* manuscript.

The 'Acknowledgements' include general editor John Rignall's recognition of his two distinguished Consultant Editors whose work is well-known to George Eliot scholars: Gillian Beer and Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth. He also notes the assistance of the George Eliot Fellowship's Kathleen and Bill Adams. The preponderance of contributors, whose identifying initials and professional affiliations are given in a list in the prefatory matter, are from England and Scotland, but a significant number come from Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Canada, and the United States.

Rignall bears final responsibility and credit for the quality overall, including the thorough cross-referencing and the useful tables that guide the reader through the work. Besides the 'Classified Contents List' already mentioned, the prefatory material includes lists of contributors and abbreviations, a 'George Eliot Family Tree' (composed by Kathleen and Bill Adams) and 'A Note to the Reader' that offers information for navigating the work.

Following the final entry are two maps, one of places in England associated with George Eliot's work and the other marking the dates and places of her travels in Europe. Both are valuable for the general reader as well as the scholar who needs a quick reminder or verification of a detail. Like the individual bibliographies to entries, the 'General Bibliography' is quite selective. It is divided into categories, including 'Bibliographies and Reference Works', wherein readers can find other resources not included individually in the *Companion*. Following the bibliography is an 'Alphabetical List of Characters' which includes all named characters in the fiction and poems and the principal figures in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, with reference to the work from which they come. The decision to present them this way instead of as separate entries is a sound one, and a reminder that this is not simply a dictionary. Characters appear in the discussions of the work as integral parts of the interpretive context.

The final appended table is a Time Chart from George Eliot's birth in 1819 to her death in

1880. Parallel columns present events in her own life set against a selective list of contemporaneous events from the public sphere. In the latter, literary publications predominate, but there is also reference to major historical events such as First and Second Reform bills, the Chartist riots, famine in Ireland, the revolutions of 1848, the beginning of the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and his assassination two years later, and the Franco-Prussian War. Where these have a direct relevance to George Eliot's life and work (including a place in her letters), they are given separate entries.

The volume also offers thirty-two full-page illustrations of George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, other family members, friends such as Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes (later Belloc), places associated with Eliot, and title or cover pages and illustrations from her works. The only one I thought a curious choice was the full page photograph of Eliza Lynn Linton, who is described in the entry on her as having, 'in her later years . . . produced her spiteful memoir of George Eliot', posthumously published in 1899 as *My Literary Life* (234). Perhaps the illustration was included as a gesture to disinterestedness.

A query from a student while I was writing this review made me wish that the editors had chosen at least one more illustration. My student had been doing some background reading on the author of *Adam Bede* and, querying me on the reasons for George Eliot's pseudonym, she asked what name was used on the author's grave marker. Although I've made several visits to Highgate cemetery, I couldn't at the moment visualize the wording. Alas, my search in the *Companion* proved fruitless, although I was able to make out the information from a not-very-distinct photograph in a recent biography.

Of course no encyclopædic work, however compendious, can include every subject that every reader might seek. But the *Oxford Companion* surely comes close to achieving that goal. The editor's Preface describes the volume's aspirations thus: 'to be a lively, up-to-date, informative, and wide-ranging reference work that will serve the interests of specialists and general readers alike. In eschewing the example of Casaubon, it seeks, rather, to emulate that of Dorothea and to be "incalculably diffusive" in its effect on the many readers of George Eliot.' This is a lofty aspiration, but it is one that the work admirably achieves.

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