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## Review of George Eliot & Middlemarch

Tim Dolin

George Eliot

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**Tim Dolin, *George Eliot (Authors in Context, Oxford University Press, 2005),*  
pp. xix + 284. ISBN 0 19 284047 9**

**George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Gregory Maertz (Broadview, 2004), pp. 739.  
ISBN 1 55111 233 7**

Both books under review appear in series that aim to give new currency to texts and authors by the provision of critical and cultural context. The implied audience is not simply the old 'sixth form and junior undergraduate' cohorts: there is a presumption of an informed wider readership which appreciates and in some cases requires assistance from critical commentary and scholarly apparatus. Such guidance is appropriately supplied in accordance with their respective series briefs by Gregory Maertz in his edition of *Middlemarch* and Tim Dolin in his study of George Eliot. Maertz makes a distinct scholarly contribution to study of George Eliot's acknowledged masterpiece, though in the nature of his editorial enterprise he does not have a lot of room for manoeuvre. Dolin, working in a more flexible but pretty stock genre, engagingly presents a fresh and independent account of George Eliot's life and work.

Oxford's Authors in Context series is uniform with the Oxford World's Classics – a notable marketing inspiration, which underwrites both the identity and authority of the studies it publishes. The authors are charged with providing 'detailed coverage of the values and debates that colour the writing of particular authors.... Set in their social, cultural, and political contexts, classic books take on new meaning for modern readers'. We've heard it all before, of course: but Tim Dolin delivers handsomely on his commission, succeeding in offering something close to 'new meaning' – certainly new understanding. He analyses the phenomenon 'George Eliot' with an acute sympathy that in its early twenty-first century way is analogous to that demonstrated by George Eliot's own authorial character. I had anticipated skimming through this book, but found myself reading with profit and at times intense pleasure. The opening analysis of Victorian textual and visual representations of George Eliot is a good example of the way Dolin approaches familiar material with a sometimes disconcerting discrimination. He is good both at exposition and analysis, reading visual texts along with printed ones with illuminating facility. Passages like that on Frith's 'The Railway Station' do important work in Dolin's argument; as does the late discussion of the ways the BBC-TV mini-series *Daniel Deronda* calls on images from Frith and Tissot. And reproduction of Comte's Positivist Calendar 1830-1842 in the chapter on 'Eliot and Victorian Science' tellingly shows how provocative that French philosopher appeared to certain eminent Victorians. At the risk of appearing picky, I venture to observe however that there are a couple of unfortunate captions on p. 22 – Samuel Lawrence's sketch of GE was not produced in 1957; and the dog photographed with Lewes is not the famous Pug (look at the dog's features), but rather his successor the bull terrier Ben, described by GHL in 1864 as 'the pet and tyrant of our household'.

Dolin's exposition of 'The Fabric of Society' and 'Literary and Cultural Contexts' keeps good touch with George Eliot, rather than setting up a background to which she is an absent foreground. He moves with ease among the novels in subsequent chapters, which focus on particular topics – the Woman Question, religion, and so on. His strengths are best demonstrated in the final chapter, "Recontextualizing George Eliot", where he is able with ease

to provide a theoretically informed overview of her critical fortunes, followed by an excellent analysis of screen adaptations of her work, leading to a fine and well-earned peroration. There is also a chronology, recommended reading including websites, and a useful list of adaptations. This title has made its way immediately to the top of my list of recommended reading on George Eliot.

Gregory Maertz's *Broadview Middlemarch* makes different claims for attention in the competitive market for prescribed or recommended editions of set texts. Over the last few years, Broadview Editions have developed an enterprising list of titles, including a strong eighteenth-century representation and a good many nineteenth-century titles, both poetry and prose, that are in all senses well-designed for classroom use. The handsome production values and thoughtful series format has been kind to Maertz, as he acknowledges. Maertz's introduction avowedly comes out of his particular investment in George Eliot in relation to the German Romantic tradition, and is perhaps rather particular for the purpose (as well as being at times congested by lists). The volume includes features such as a chronology, note on the text, and select bibliography, with a selection from George Eliot's essays, and another of 'Contemporary Reviews of *Middlemarch*'. There is also a sample of 'Historical Documents'. He has been able to include a couple of illustrations: the 'Sleeping Ariadne' in the Vatican Museum, and Bernini's 'The Ecstasy of St. Theresa' – though I found his discussion of the latter overstated. But I hasten to emphasise that in general he gives comprehensive attention to George Eliot and the visual arts.

It is the explanatory notes that are likely to be of the most immediate use and interest for a reader (especially as they are conveniently at the foot of the page not the back of the book). Here Maertz makes a perhaps hubristic claim for his thoroughgoing purging of error and rectification of omissions. Like all annotators he is occasionally over-earnest and there are inevitably some discords, like that in the note on cricket (explicitly directed to North American readers) on p. 459, where he has 'bales' flying when a batsman is bowled out. A particularly egregious example is one of the notes to Virginia Woolf's 1919 piece (the inclusion of which among 'Contemporary Reviews of *Middlemarch*' rather stretches the definition of 'contemporary'), where Maertz informs us that the observation about *Middlemarch* being written for grown-up people is 'A famous comment on the novel'. Such matters aside, the plain fact is that we have different philosophies of annotation: I take the view that the editor should supply sufficient information to explain a reference, not provide a complete rundown on the subject. Maertz is at the polar extreme, and there are places where I think his glosses are excessive, sometimes veering from explication into interpretation (I have in mind occasions like the note on sculpture on p. 175, or on Dorothea's comments on Mr Brooke's art collection on pp. 323-4). All of this said, Maertz has produced a thoughtful edition, but most likely local conditions, and sordid considerations like price, will determine whether it is preferred in the classroom.

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