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Review of George Eliot and Victorian Attitudes to Racial Diversity, Colonialism, Darwinism, Class, Gender, and Jewish Culture and Prophecy

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Brenda McKay, *George Eliot and Victorian Attitudes to Racial Diversity, Colonialism, Darwinism, Class, Gender, and Jewish Culture and Prophecy* (Edwin Mellon Press, 2003), pp. xxxiii + 597. ISBN 0 7734 06621 5

Brenda McKay's volume, *George Eliot and Victorian Attitudes to Racial Diversity, Colonialism, Darwinism, Class, Gender, and Jewish Culture and Prophecy* will most likely appear on most of our students' and colleagues' bibliographies for some time to come. The topics addressed in this book will clearly appeal to our current generation of scholars and budding scholars; McKay describes her book in the Prologue as being 'chiefly devoted' to the study of 'the race discourse' in Eliot's work. In addition, as the unwieldy title suggests, McKay tries to connect to this emphasis on race issues of 'Colonialism, Darwinism, Class, Gender, and Jewish Culture and Prophecy' – an ambitious conception. While I cannot help but admire McKay's scope of research, her own erudition on any number of topics central to Victorian and Eliot studies, and her attempt to weave these topics into a larger unified argument, the final design of the book reflects the flaws one can find in the title: a book too ambitious to connect too many different specific discourses and issues. Thus while, as Rosemary Ashton rightly suggests in her elegant Preface, the book will certainly 'enhance' a reader's 'appreciation of [Eliot's] works – and of George Eliot's marvelous imaginative and intellectual range' (xv), it will not, I suspect, satisfy those seeking a coherent critical argument about Eliot's work. Indeed, the proposed scope of the book is so huge that I was loathe to attempt to evaluate it as a whole; my purpose here is to examine the sections specifically related to Judaism, Cabbala, and Jewish identity, leaving an evaluation of the larger project to those with more demonstrated expertise in Eliot studies.

My desire to read this book came from my own current work on Eliot and her relationship to discourses of poetry and Jewish identity; along with piquing my interest, however, the title of McKay's project gave me pause. Would the volume illuminate George Eliot's own attitudes toward this area, or delineate her reaction more generally to Victorian culture's approach to this topic? And what exactly would be encompassed in the terms 'Jewish culture and prophecy' – problematic terms in Jewish studies as they erase distinctions between Judaism as a religious practice, Jewish identity as both ethnic and religious, and Jewish culture as a catch-all term for the ways Jewish people construct an identity that is neither strictly religious nor racial. As I read on in McKay's prologue, I found that there were what seemed to be two specific goals of the book: one goal is to 'situate [Eliot] within a wider context of mid nineteenth century debates on cultural and racial difference generally' (xvii) – an admirable aim. But, at the end of that paragraph, McKay adds that 'I also wish to synthesise and – more importantly – to extend work on George Eliot and Judaism in particular [...] hopefully furnish[ing] an altered context for other scholars to return to her fiction and poetry' (xviii). That 'also' confused me – masking exactly what the connection between these issues of Judaism and those of cultural and racial difference were more specifically – beyond a general notion of 'otherness' that does not carry much analytical weight. The Preface goes on to suggest that the book will offer 'a general investigation of George Eliot's interest in ethnicity', and then ends by suggesting it will also augment the many fine studies on George Eliot and Judaism by offering critical perspectives on 'newer areas such as her problematic and Utopian interest in Israel [...] the Safed school of Jewish mysticism and its leader Isaac Luria, as well as a range of other Hebrew writers,

Zionism, prophecy and Jewish music' (xx).

Again, I felt a bit anxious: were all those major topics in Jewish studies and Eliot's interaction with them all part of a 'general investigation of "ethnicity"'? Such a claim would certainly minimize the impact and scope of a whole field we call Jewish studies, and I wished that McKay had more carefully laid out the case for why the Jewish material was intrinsically related to the discussion of race and ethnicity – even if to some it appears obvious. Of course, in many ways, McKay in upholding a general tendency in the minute field some of us call Victorian Jewish Studies, in which Jewish identity is almost always subsumed under the rubric of race and ethnicity; my criticism of her assumed connection between the two fields of inquiry – race and ethnicity and Jewish studies – is one that cannot be levelled only at her work. Here, we need only see the ways in which – at least in the USA – the two fields are almost always separated in scholarly and academic contexts, and there are obviously political as well as theoretical motives that keep Jewish studies and Ethnic Studies separated; nevertheless, there are some important theoretical issues about the relationships between Jewish Studies and ethnic studies that needed to be addressed to make McKay's case for inclusion coherent.

As I think McKay is implying, these fields were much more porous for Victorians, who of course did understand Jewish identity as a racial as well as religious identity. But when I examined most of the specific sections on Jewish issues, concerned not with issues of Jewish racial discourse per se, but rather with the mystical, theological, and philosophical traditions of Judaism, I again wondered how these were related to the larger topic of 'race discourse' in any authentic way. I was further dismayed to see that one of the scholars who has most propelled the discussion of Victorian attitudes toward Jewish identity and racial discourse – Michael Ragussis – was unmentioned, even in the Bibliography, and the pioneering work of Bryan Cheyette was barely acknowledged. In the end, I cannot figure out why this volume was not conceived of as two books, one on Victorian race theory, and one on Eliot and her interests in Judaism, as the two topics do not inherently cohere, and McKay seems somewhat uninterested in the more recent history of scholarship on Eliot and Jewish identity.

When I did get to Part Three: Jewish Culture: Cabbala and Prophecy, Zionism and Art, I was often invigorated by the depth of McKay's scholarship in Jewish mysticism in particular. Of course, she is building on an exemplary tradition of scholarship pioneered by William Baker and Jane Irwin in their respective work on Eliot's notebooks, scholars who are amply cited. It is valuable to demonstrate, as this section does, that '[b]oth Judaism and, elsewhere, the discourse of science created a mythic substructure to George Eliot's fiction' (362); nevertheless, to lump the discourse of science with Judaism is a tall order of thought. But as I read into this section, I began to wonder what a reader not familiar with basic (and quite different) strains of Jewish philosophy and mysticism might make of this material (or at least a reader who was not married to a Cabbala scholar willing to answer questions, as I am). McKay has made fascinating links between not only Darwin's theories and those of the sixteenth-century Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, but somewhat incredibly sweeping generalizations about Jewish thought. While many of her analyses of Lurianic Cabbala, and the work of the medieval poet and philosopher Jehuda Halevi are fascinating, they actually (though not surprisingly) interpret Jewish mystical ideas in quite specific ways that McKay does not always claim as interpretative. Likewise, if indeed Eliot was making the intellectual links

between racial identities and Jewish mysticism that McKay suggests, it would be worth pointing out to readers less informed in Jewish mysticism that the Jewish mystics were completely uninterested in race theory, and their theories of unification and differentiation operated on a strictly cosmic plane. Of course, they can be interpreted outside of that context, but these nuances often get lost in McKay's work.

Yet for a reader more comfortable with the Jewish citations and allusions, there will also be problems. There are some strange moments of translations – like the repeated half translation of 'Book Jetzira' which most scholars worldwide generally refer to as Sefer Yetzira (or occasionally the Book of Creation); true, sefer does mean book, but this little slip suggests McKay may be out of her depth in her work with Jewish mysticism. Some of the translations of Cabbala come from rather strange sources, like a 1925 German historical romance; sometimes Talmudic page references are given, but it is unclear whether McKay had access to any primary Hebrew sources herself.

The result of all this is that I was both intrigued with the ways McKay was linking Jewish Mystical thought to Eliot's own thinking about Jewish and racial identity, and engaged with the idea that Eliot was recontextualizing Jewish mystical thought into a Victorian intellectual context, but I could not find a consistent methodology or argument in much of this material. This problem reaches an apex in the section on Zionism, where in the context of exploring Eliot's possible influence on the Balfour Declaration, McKay indulges in a full five pages of her own views of contemporary Israeli/Palestinian politics. What becomes clear as this section goes on is that McKay is attempting to refute critics like Edward Said and Neil McCraw, to create a 'defence' of Eliot's ideas. This approach seems the least fruitful one in the book.

This book will appeal to many seeking a coherent vision of Eliot's ideas about race, and for many, my own desire for distinction between a focus on racial discourse and Jewish discourse will not be compelling. There is an enormous amount of research in this volume, and McKay is a scholar with a stupendous grasp on Eliot's position vis à vis Victorian intellectual culture. That said, the overall conception, structure and argument of the giant volume didn't satisfy me on many counts; I hope it fares better with other reviewers who may be able to put the book in a larger, more general context of Eliot studies.

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