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## Book Review: George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning

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Handley, Graham, "Book Review: George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning" (1987). *The George Eliot Review*. 75.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

by Graham Handley

### George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning

by Sally Shuttleworth

Cambridge University Press, 1984. viii x 257.

This is a sustained investigation of the novels (Scenes of Clerical Life is virtually omitted) and the scientific climate and knowledge which inform them. It is a necessary and stimulating book, firmly anchored in 19th century scientific theory. It underpins what we have always known but never perhaps spelled out fully, and that is the depth and width of George Eliot's scientific interests and how she integrated them into her work. Dr. Shuttleworth notes that George Eliot's knowledge of science was 'unmatched by any of her peers' and at the same time indicates the centre of her own study - 'the field of organic theory'. In her structure she follows George Eliot's 'own pattern of composition'. Her aim is to explore 'the key social and political issues of nineteenth-century organic theory'. She records the changes and developments in George Eliot's own scientific thought from Adam Bede onwards. She examines the common belief which George Eliot shared with Comte, Lewes and Herbert Spencer, 'that science could provide the foundations for a system of ethical conduct.' In Adam Bede the harvest supper is a 'celebration of historical stasis and simultaneous recognition of evolutionary progress' while in The Mill on the Floss she notes in the beginning 'the narrator's Proust-like submergence into the world of unconscious memory'. Her most impressive contribution seems to be in her examination of the nature of 'The dual structure of The Mill on the Floss - the cyclical and the progressive'. There is a perceptive aside on 'The Lifted Veil', which may be considered 'a parallel text, only without The Mill's redemptive strategy.' There is a particularly interesting section on Silas's repetitive activity in Silas Marner and George Eliot's employment of 'physiological theory'. She demonstrates

here, quite rightly, that small is complex as well as being beautiful. In Romola she notes that Savonarola 'preaches the positivist doctrine of altruism outlined by Comte'. The relation between Comte's theory of human identity and the conception of the character of Baldassarre is directly demonstrated. Another interesting focus, this time on the science of phrenology, occurs in Felix Holt. Again Dr. Shuttleworth traces in this novel the influence of Comte, here in his approach to history where 'social change is represented primarily in terms of mental development.' There is also evidence in the novel of George Eliot's concern 'with the "woman" question'. In Middlemarch Dr. Shuttleworth notes 'The constant shifts in perspective within the chapters' and she later adds 'The jumps in perspective reflect the heterogeneous structure of the social organism itself.' The conclusion that the labyrinth in Middlemarch is the controlling idea seems to me to be self-evident. She considers the jumping forth and back in time in Daniel Deronda, and here she argues, as it seems to me convincingly, for George Eliot's conception of unity. She is particularly good on George Eliot's use of an epigraph from Fontenelle which 'captures Gwendolen's bravado, and the relationship between self-assessment and cosmology'. There is a very interesting section on 'the central organicist value of duty'. And her conclusion, that George Eliot adopted in Daniel Deronda 'a more open narrative form than in her earlier work' seems to me to be incontrovertible. The 'variety of narrative strategies' which her analysis of the novels reveals is abundantly and incisively clear. Another piece in the jig-saw of George Eliot's intellectualism is fitted in with this book.

### George Eliot

by Gillian Beer

Key Women Writers. The Harvester Press. 1986

xii x 246

This is an enlightened and enlightening book. In her

first chapter the author says 'I hope that I have avoided that form of ghetto which implies that only women are fit topic for women.' Gillian Beer has avoided it. The survey of a body of criticism which has been largely concerned to show that George Eliot had no positive attitude towards the emergence of feminism, is admirable. She is witty where others have tried to be witty, on the choice of the name Eliot, for example. Her second chapter covers the range of George Eliot's contributions to the Westminster Review. She notes that at this stage George Eliot was 'still under the sway of phrenology'. She traces connections with Jane Austen, notes George Eliot's admiration of Villette as well as showing the influence on her of the Swedish feminist Fredrika Bremer and the work of Geraldine Jewsbury. Chapter Three shows George Eliot 'Putting on Man's Apparel'. There is an interesting focus on one of the stories in the Arabian Nights. Throughout this book one is made aware of Gillian Beer's casual wisdom about the nature of George Eliot's work, for instance when she observes of the early writings that the author was 'developing the central theme of her work: that commonplace life is heroic.' There is a brilliant note on 'The Lifted Veil' which relates it not only to George Eliot's work but to the author's life. The section on women and martyrdom, with a balanced glance at Clarissa, is a telling examination of The Mill on the Floss. Her conclusion is that after that novel the heroines 'must go on living', that death is not the solution for her fictional women beset by problems. This is perhaps evident, but it is nonetheless worth saying. In the succeeding novels 'the theme of genetic parents and foster-parents becomes remarkably important.' True. Dr. Beer calls Silas Marner 'this small but profound work', while she notes of Felix Holt that 'the arch-conservative, Mrs. Transome, is far and away the most radical person in feeling.' Another truth here is, I think, Gillian Beer's assertion that 'The private world of the woman extends outwards to test the men in the book.' There is a convincing demonstration that in Middlemarch George Eliot took up current questions in relation to the role or roles of women. There is a useful summary of Barbara Bodichon's public influence as well as her influence on George Eliot, and an investigation of those Victorian

studies which examined the condition of women. There is too a fascinating note on mortmain, following the 1855 commission on that subject, which Gillian Beer directly relates to Book V, 'The Dead Hand', in Middlemarch. I also found valuable deductions in the examination of Mrs. Browning's Aurora Leigh which George Eliot had reviewed so favourably. In her poems and in Daniel Deronda George Eliot 'turned to the difficulty of the exceptional woman and of women seeking to be exceptional'. Also stimulating is Dr. Beer's examination of George Eliot's technique in Daniel Deronda whereby 'She triples the figure of the woman singer'. There is an incisive emphasis on the maenad/matron contrast between Gwendolen and Mrs. Glasher. The book comes to an abrupt end. In truth that does not diminish the richness, the incisiveness of its effect.

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Customer: "Have you a copy of Mill, On Liberty?"

Library Assistant (after consulting stock list): "Sorry, we haven't got it on Liberty, but I can let you have it on the Floss."