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SILAS MARNER: GEORGE ELIOT AND MME LE PRINCE DE BEAUMONT

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At the beginning of chapter 15 of *Silas Marner* (1861), there is a reference to a well-known fairy tale. The paragraph is as follows:

That famous ring that pricked its owner when he forgot duty and followed desire -- I wonder if it pricked very hard when he set out on the chase, or whether it pricked but lightly then, and only pierced to the quick when the chase had long been ended, and hope, folding her wings, looked backward and became regret? (Penguin ed., p. 191)

Joseph Wiesenfarth has identified the fairy tale as 'Prince Darling.' He quotes from the first of Andrew Lang's anthologies, *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), which gives its source simply as the *Cabinet des fées*. After briefly summarizing the story, he concludes, 'Fairyland paraphernalia removed, Darling's story is Godfrey's' ('Demythologizing SM' ELH 37, 1970, 226-244; p.231). My intention is not to elaborate on this parallel, but to propose where and when George Eliot is most likely to have read the story, and to suggest that its author may have been an important influence on her.

George Eliot could well have read 'Prince Darling' recently, for example in *Four and Twenty Fairy Tales*, edited by J. R. Planché. (London, 1858), but there is no copy of this book in her library. It is much more probable that she read the story as a child - i.e. between 1826 and 1829. I doubt if she read it in the *Cabinet des fées*, a vast 41-volume collection of fairy tales edited by M. deMayer (Amsterdam, 1785-89). 'Le Prince Chéri' (Prince Darling) is found in volume 35, which contains ten fairy tales by Mme Le Prince de Beaumont. There are two other possibilities. She may have come across it in a children's anthology: 'Prince Cheri' (often corrupted into 'Prince Cherry') was a favourite story during the early nineteenth century (see Planché, pp. 547-8). But the most likely hypothesis is that she read the work in which the story originally appeared: *The Young Misses Magazine* (London, 1756/57) by Mme Le Prince de Beaumont, an enormously popular educational work which was frequently reprinted until well into the nineteenth century.

Today, Mme Le Prince de Beaumont (1711-1780) is known only as the author of the classic version of 'Beauty and the Beast'. But in the mid nineteenth century, she was still remembered as a popular novelist, and as a prolific writer of educational works for women and children, Christian apologetics, and moral tales. She came from a large artistic family: her younger brother was Jean-Baptiste Le Prince, a painter admired by Diderot (see the *Salon de 1765*). As a young woman, she taught at a convent school for teachers in Rouen. She married M. de Beaumont in the 1730's, and it was when this unhappy marriage was annulled in 1745 that she turned to writing to supplement a meagre income. Her first novel, *Le Triomphe de la vérité*, was published in Nancy in 1748. Soon after, she settled in London, where she married a Frenchman, Thomas Pichon, and worked as a governess. Meanwhile, under her first married name, she started the *Nouveau Magasin Francais*, a monthly magazine aimed primarily at women (London, 1750-52 and 1755). She also wrote full-length didactic works such as the *Education complete* (London, 1753), *Civan, roi de Bungo* (London, 1754), which is set in Japan, the *Anecdotes du XIVE siècle* (London, 1759), as well as the highly popular, epistolary novels, *Lettres de Madame Du Montier* (London, 1756/tr. *The History of a Young Lady of Distinction*. 1758) and *La nouvelle Clarice* (London, 1767/tr. *The New*

Clarissa, 1768). In 1768, she returned with her husband to France where she continued writing until her death. Many of her works were immediately translated into English, and subsequently into the other major European languages. Numerous editions suggest that they were widely read throughout Europe and America between 1750 and about 1820.

The most important of her works is the *Magasin des Enfants* (London, 1756/tr. *The Young Misses Magazine*), the only one which continued being reprinted until quite late in the nineteenth century, especially in France. It is divided into 'days' in the course of which a governess, called Mrs Affable in the English translation, converses with her pupils (Ladies Sensible, Witty, Trifle, Tempest, Mary, Charlotte) who are aged between five and thirteen. Each day, lessons on history, geography, and science are alternated with Bible stories and fairy tales: 'Prince Darling' is the first of the fairy tales told, 'Beauty and the Beast' is the second, etc. Mme Le Prince de Beaumont wrote three sequels: the *Magasin des Adolescentes* (London, 1760; tr. as *The Young Ladies Magazine*, 1760) introduces the same girls and others in their teens (Miss Frivolous, Lady Sincere, etc.) to philosophy; the *Instructions pour les jeunes dames qui entrent dans le monde et qui se marient* (London, 1764; tr. as *Instructions for Young Ladies on their entering into life*, 1764) outlines the duties of a wife; *Les Américaines* (Lyon, 1770) introduces the same young women to theology. The format was much copied in the nineteenth century, but never equalled.

Mrs Affable is always respectful of her pupils' individuality: the title page of *The Young Misses Magazine* informs us that 'Each lady is made to speak according to her particular Genius, Temper and Inclination.' The question and answer technique is designed to stimulate the girls' independent thought, greater self awareness, and ability to conduct a reasoned debate: 'Oui Messrs. les tyrans, j'ai dessein de les tirer de cette ignorance crasse, a la quelle vous les avez condamnées... Je veux leur apprendre a penser, a penser juste, pour parvenir a bien vivre' (1760 ed. I, xi: tr. 'Yes, you tyrant men, my aim is to rescue women from the crass ignorance to which you have condemned them ... I want to teach them to think, to think correctly, in order to help them to live better'). At a time when woman received virtually no formal education, this intention was revolutionary. It is, arguably, the first work written not for a specific child, usually male, but for *all* 'young ladies of quality'; the first to address children as children and not as young adults, and to do so without being condescending.¹ Inevitably, in time Mme Le Prince de Beaumont's books fell out of fashion, and when they did, except for two or three of her fairy tales - notably 'Beauty and the Beast' - none was ever republished. They were the first victims of a movement for better education which she did much to create. She deserves to be better known than she is. She was the first woman to attempt editing a monthly magazine aimed primarily at women, and an indefatigable promoter of women's equal right to learning.

George Eliot clearly thought that readers of *Silas Marner* would know the story she was referring to. Every literate adult of 1861, especially women readers, would have remembered 'Prince Darling' as the first fairy tale in *The Young Misses Magazine*.² The probability that Mary Ann Evans read this children's classic is interesting principally because of the number of parallels between the two writers. Mme Le Prince de Beaumont's work is characterized by its strong moral tone. She had a profound belief in divine Providence and a firmly held view that an individual can identify and should correct his or her faults. She also had a strong sense of humour. One need scarcely add that all these qualities are found in George Eliot's work. Both women were at once

conservative and independent; both set a high value on learning; both held that women should rely not on men, but on their own inner resources; and both overcame considerable personal difficulties to achieve success through their writings. Could it be that Mme Le Prince de Beaumont served as an example -- or a 'precursor' (to borrow Sandra Gilbert's term) -- for the young Mary Ann Evans?

From adolescence onwards, George Eliot's mind was moulded by far greater thinkers than Mme Le Prince de Beaumont. It is for this reason that the very specific reference to 'Prince Darling' is so illuminating: it implies that it - and perhaps the whole of *The Young Misses Magazine* -- made a lasting impression on her. Perhaps it was the 'moral' tone of *Silas Marner* which reminded her of her childhood reading. Further study might reveal other parallels. My intention here is simply to contend that the gently ironic reference to the 'famous' story in chapter 15 of *Silas Marner* is not only pertinent to Godfrey's situation; it is also an acknowledgement of an unexpected influence -- an echo from the author's childhood undrowned by more recent voices.

FOOTNOTES

1) See Patricia A. Clancy, 'Mme Le Prince de Beaumont: Founder of Children's literature', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, xvi (1979), 281-87, and id. 'A French writer and educator in England: mme Le Prince de Beaumont', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, cci (1982), 195-208.

2) It is worth noting that 'Beauty and the Beast' is referred to in a very similar way in Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (Pt I, ch. xiii; 1900 ed. p.99), which was also published in 1861.



Two drawings of Mary Ann Evans by Caroline Bray from Mrs. Bray's Sketchbook in the Nuneaton Museum Collection. The drawings were executed on holiday in Europe in 1849.