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GEORGE ELIOT'S "THE SPANISH GYPSY", A Neglected Work.*

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“Undoubtedly much the greatest poem of any wide scope and on a plan of any magnitude, which has ever proceeded from a woman”(1) This was the critical acclaim that George Eliot's “The Spanish Gypsy” received on its publication in 1868. It was a surprise to the writer herself, who had been prepared for criticism. This is evident in a letter to a friend following the completion of the poem (2). She notes in this her belief that many people would despise her for writing a work which would bring her little in the way of financial remuneration when she could have made ‘easy’ money from publishing another novel. She also felt that many of her critics would accuse her of being foolish in adopting a change in form and methodology. Both these assumptions were proved ill-founded but George Eliot was right in her perception that people had become accustomed to her primarily as a novelist, someone whom ‘they hitherto have found readable and debatable’ (3). And this, surely, is our perception of George Eliot today. She is taught and read as a novelist to the exclusion of her work as a nineteenth century poet. Her achievements in “The Spanish Gypsy” and in her collected poems in The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems are largely ignored (4).

“The Spanish Gypsy” continues to be the most neglected work by George Eliot. This poem, described as “a tragic play in blank verse, laid in 1498” (5) ran into five editions during the nineteenth century. There is no modern edition of the verse drama and there are very few references to it in critical appraisals of George Eliot's career. Such a fate seems strange in the light of its reception on publication. For example, a reviewer in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, June 1868, stated that “it is emphatically a great poem, great in conception, great in execution” and concludes that few “will fail to share our conviction that the author who holds so lofty a place among novelists, must also infallibly, and immediately, take high rank among poets”. This has not been the case. George Eliot as a nineteenth century poet has gone largely unexplored.

Such neglect has implications for the way in which George Eliot's novels have been received and her career charted. For a reading of “The Spanish

Gypsy” - placed as it is between the publication of her novels Felix Holt and Middlemarch - challenges the present critical assumptions that George Eliot’s career as a novelist was developmental, one which moves from that of the writer of provincial works such as Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede through to her last novel, Daniel Deronda, which is concerned with wider, worldly issues. “The Spanish Gypsy” demonstrates that George Eliot as a writer was constantly preoccupied with wider issues, for example, the implications of race, inheritance and gender. Similarly, it emphasises her approach which analyses the fate of a private individual life in relation to the wider public world. The intertextual relationship and thematic significance of the poem deny the reductive view that George Eliot’s career was one where “the voice of liberal humanism has become the voice of jingoist reaction” (6).

A recent biography of George Eliot is prefaced by the claim that it will treat “George Eliot’s work as a whole: the translations and essays as well as the novels” only then to dismiss her poetry curtly,

“Poetry was not George Eliot’s strong suit, and despite their intellectual interest her long poems are not exciting reading, not even “The Spanish Gypsy” with its background in the Spanish Inquisition and its interesting questions about the nature of freedom”. (7)

This kind of superficial evaluation and dismissal begs more questions than answers regarding judgments about issues of ‘excitement’ and ‘intellectual interest’. Such an approach fosters the continued marginalisation and virtual disappearance of George Eliot the poet at a time when critical practice must

“actively seek out the process of production of the text: the organisation of the discourses which constitute it and the strategies by which it smooths over the incoherences and contradictions of the ideology inscribed in it” (8)

Debates about intertextuality, authorial ideology and literary productions should be ‘opening up’ rather than ‘closing down’ texts.

The limitations of space prevent a detailed account of the complexity of “The Spanish Gypsy” but as there is no edition in print it seems appropriate to briefly note the main thematic concerns of the poem and its genesis. In the poet’s own words

“the Spanish Gypsy, although a work connected with Spain - is not a Romance ... It is a poem ... It is not historic but has merely historical connections” (9).

In her Notebooks she explains that

“I chose the title “The Spanish Gypsy” a long time ago because it is in the fashion of the elder dramatists with whom I have perhaps more cousinship than with recent poets.”

Her summer reading adds to this claim of ‘cousinship’ as she notes how her reading of “the semi-savage poem”, The Iliad, inspires her. She says

“How enviable it is to be a classic, when a verse in The Iliad bears six different meanings and nobody knows which is the right, a commentator finds this equivocalness in itself admirable” (10).

The density of classical literature appealed to George Eliot and is thus a model adopted for her own writing. It is the ‘old masters’ she aspires to join, not her contemporaries.

This also has significance for “The Spanish Gypsy” in the perception it offers in relation to her views on tragedy.

“A good tragic subject must represent a possible, sufficiently probable, not a common action and to be really tragic, it must represent irreparable collision between the individual and the general... The collision of Greek tragedy is often between hereditary, entailed Nemesis, and the peculiar individual lot, awakening our sympathy, of the particular man or woman whom the Nemesis is shown to grasp with terrific force.” (11)

It is this kind of tragedy that we find in “The Spanish Gypsy” with the story of Fedalma, who having been fostered and brought up in a Spanish courtly household discovers, on the eve of her marriage to a Spanish Duke, Don Silva, that she is actually the daughter of the Gypsy leader Zarca. Fedalma thus renounces ‘her ordinary lot’ in order to carry out the wishes of her newly discovered father - to become on his death the Gypsy Queen and the leader of her tribe. This tragedy of the clash ‘between the individual and the general’ is through inheritance and can also be applied to the Duke, Don Silva. For he too wishes to renounce his past and his race because of his love for Fedalma and his desire to be with her. Thus, as the poem unfolds, both Don Silva and

Fedalma have tragic lives as a consequence of their backgrounds - with regard to parentage, race, religion, wealth and status. There is also a tension throughout the poem between the individuals' private life and their public duty.

The poem is set in Spain during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella when a common bond of persecution united the Moors, Jews and Gypsies. So while I noted above George Eliot's statement that the poem was not historic, she was obviously drawn to issues prevalent in the late fifteenth century. Central to the poem is the bonding together of the Moors, the Jews and the Gypsies in adversity as they were threatened with expulsion. The major characters in "The Spanish Gypsy" are thus drawn to have representative qualities of these different racial groups and their conflicts with the Spanish, Catholic hierarchy.

Thus a preliminary reading of "The Spanish Gypsy" not only provides further insights into George Eliot's thoughts on religion, art, politics, history, race and the plight of the individual within these. It also provides a 'different' George Eliot from the novelist in relation to her skills as a poet - her uses of form, language and lyrics. It is thus of vital importance and significance to any scholar/reader of George Eliot in providing a new perspective for interpretation from a work 'marvellously crafted, beautiful and imaginative'(12).

Footnotes

1. Gordon Haight, George Eliot. A Biography, (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1985) p.404.
2. Letter to Mrs. Charles Bray, 7 May 1868, Gordon Haight, Selections from George Eliot's Letters, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985) p.346.
3. Letter to Mrs. Charles Bray, p.346.
4. The poem which has received the most attention has been 'Armgarth' which appears in the collection The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems. See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic (Yale University Press, New Haven 1979) and Gillian Beer, George Eliot, (Harvester, Brighton, 1986)
5. Gordon Haight, Selections from George Eliot's Letters, p.313.
6. Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology (Verso, London, 1978), p.125.
7. Elizabeth Deeds Eimarth, George Eliot, (Twayne Pub., Boston, 1985).

8. Catherine Belsey, Critical Practice, (Methuen and Co, London, 1980) p.129.
9. Letter to John Blackwood, 21 March 1867, in Gordon Haight, Selections from George Eliot's Letters, p.330.
10. Letter to Sara Hennell, 22 March 1868, in Gordon Haight, Selections from George Eliot's Letters, p.342.
11. F.B. Pinion, A George Eliot Miscellany, a Supplement to her Novels, (MacMillan, 1982) p.127.
12. Henry James, Review of 'The Spanish Gypsy', Nation, 7 (1868) pp.12-14.

**This article is drawn from my dissertation An Introductory Reading of George Eliot's 'The Spanish Gypsy'. A copy of this is in the George Eliot Collection at Nuneaton Library.*