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Ashton, Roemary, "The Nineteenth George Eliot Memorial Lecture- 1990" (1991). *The George Eliot Review*. 158.

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THE NINETEENTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE - 1990

delivered by

Dr. Rosemary Ashton

**George Eliot's 'Husband' :
Writing the Life of G.H. Lewes**

In July 1990 I finished writing a biography of G.H. Lewes, which will be published by Oxford University Press in September 1991. There could be no better subject to have than Lewes (1817-1878). He is, of course, best remembered as the faithful companion, the husband in fact if not in law, of Marian Evans, the man without whose energy and support she might not have found the courage to become George Eliot. If he had nothing more than this to recommend him, he would still be worthy of our attention. But Lewes has a great deal more than this to recommend him. When he met Marian Evans in Jeff's bookshop in the Burlington Arcade in October 1851, he was thirty-four years old, and had packed more activity into his thirty-four years than almost any of his contemporaries, with the notable exception of his friend Dickens, a veritable whirlwind of imaginative, political, social, and emotional energy.

The solution to the first problem facing the biographer of Lewes lies in this very fact of his early versatility. For the problem may be stated in the form of the following question: How is one to write a life of Lewes which, while giving due weight to his relationship with George Eliot - the most important relationship of his life, and of hers - will do more than merely reiterate biographies of *her* or perhaps retread old ground with some new microscope held to the eye, looking for details to add to or minutely adjust the familiar image of Lewes - Lewes as George Eliot's literary agent; Lewes the usher at the door of their home in Regent's Park - known as the Priory - during the years of her fame; Lewes permitting favoured guests to pass through into the inner sanctum where they could fall at the feet of the great Genius within? Since Lewes led a rich and busy life before he knew Marian Evans, the biographer must gratefully take advantage of this good luck and explore to the full Lewes's life up to 1854, when the liaison between him and Marian became publicly known.

A contemporary poetess, Mrs. Caroline Giffard Phillipson, believing herself to have been attacked by Lewes in an adverse review of her poetry in the *Westminster Review* in 1856, struck back in a pamphlet entitled *A Song in Prose to the Westminster Owl*,

on the Criticism of the 'Westminster Review' of July 1856, on 'Lonely Hours', Poems by Caroline Giffard Phillipson. Apeing Pope's *Dunciad*, that eighteenth-century satire on hack writing addressed to the Goddess Dulness on her throne in Smithfield Market, Mrs. Phillipson describes Lewes as 'Westminster Reviewer! - Bard! - Dramatist! - Actor! (that is, provincial actor), Biographer! Philosopher! Windmill of the hundred arms', and ends by placing Lewes, too, in 'literary Smithfield'.

The metaphor of the windmill is apt enough. (Actually, Lewes was innocent of the hatchet job done on Mrs. Phillipson's poems in the *Westminster Review*; the guilty reviewer was none other than Marian Evans!) For by the time Lewes and Marian set off for Germany in July 1854, thus making their relationship plain and public, he had behind him a breathtaking achievement in a number of careers. He was a consummate journalist, able to boast that he had access to every periodical except, as he declared gleefully, 'the damned old Quarterly' (the great organ of Tory thought). He was the literary editor of the leading radical newspaper of the time, the *Leader*, which he co-founded and co-edited with his best friend Thornton Hunt. The paper espoused all the progressive causes: electoral reform; educational reform; social improvements through sanitation and other measures being proposed by Edwin Chadwick and his fellow pioneers of public health and safety; the reform of the marriage and divorce laws to give women equal rights with men and to bring divorce within the financial means of more than just the very rich; and in general freedom of thought and freedom of speech on all issues.

Lewes was also the author of several books: a popularising history of philosophy; a book on the French positivist philosopher and father of sociology, Auguste Comte; a work on the Spanish Drama of the Golden Age; a life of Robespierre; and two bold, if mediocre, novels, *Ranthurpe* (1847) and *Rose, Blanche, and Violet* (1848). In 1854 Lewes was at work on the book which was to bring him the most praise and fame at home and abroad, and for which he undertook the journey to Weimar and Berlin with Marian - the masterly *Life of Goethe*, which was published after their return to England in 1855.

In addition, Lewes had acted in 1847 and 1848 with Dickens's amateur theatre company in London and in provincial cities, playing comic roles in *Every Man in his Humour* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. He had also written a tragedy, *The Noble Heart* (1849), in which he himself took the leading part in Liverpool and Manchester, though it was taken by a professional actor during the play's short run at the Olympic Theatre in London in 1850 - hence Mrs. Phillipson's barb, 'provincial actor'. In 1849 the windmill of the hundred arms visited Manchester and Liverpool to give lectures

at Mechanics' Institutes on the history of philosophy one night and to act the next. Jane Carlyle, who enjoyed entertaining literary men, including rather Bohemian ones like Lewes, wrote to her Liverpool cousin, alerting her to the imminent arrival of Lewes in that city early in 1849:

...little Lewes - author of *Rose Blanche* &c &c, is going to lecture in Liverpool... and I have given him my card for you... he is the most amusing little fellow in the whole world - if you only look over his unparalleled *impudence* which is not impudence at all but man-of-genius *bonhomie*... He is the best mimic in the world and full of famous stories, and no spleen or envy, or *bad* thing in him, so see that you receive him with open arms in spite of his immense ugliness.

Lewes's 'immense ugliness' was, like his wit and mimicry, legendary. Photographs show him to have been plain, but his contemporaries - even those who disapproved of him - usually agreed that his ugliness was relieved by his bright expression, twinkling eye, and talent for telling stories, many of them *risque* and rendered, appropriately enough, in French. Henry James, who sat next to him in the last year of Lewes's life, wrote to his mother that Lewes was 'personally repulsive; (as Mrs. Kemble says "He looks as if he had been gnawed by the rats" - & left;) but most clever & entertaining'. According to James, Lewes told lots of stories, chiefly in fluent French.

Lewes's 'French' manner was as often a topic of conversation as was his acquaintance with the language. And here I may raise two more questions I have had to tackle in researching Lewes's life. One is: What was his education and background; how, for example, did he come by his fluent French? The other, not unrelated to the first, is: How did he come to have the reputation for flippancy, and - worse - for practising 'French' morals in his domestic life? For of course the reason his 'marriage' to Marian Evans could not be legalised was because Lewes had a wife already. And the reason he could not petition for a divorce, even after the partially liberating Divorce Act of 1857, was that he had condoned his wife's relationship with his friend Thornton Hunt. In fact, as manuscript letters scattered in libraries from Edinburgh to Iowa show, Lewes did more than condone Agnes Lewes's relationship with Hunt; he positively encouraged it as a practical experiment in free living.

To take the first problem - Lewes's background and education - first. His family antecedents are known to have been unusual, and somewhat obscure. His grandfather was Charles Lee Lewes, a celebrated comic actor in his day, and acquaintance

of Sheridan, and most famous, as it happens, for his acting of Bobadil in Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*, the very play in which Lewes himself made his debut with Dickens's company in 1847 (though it was Dickens, not Lewes, who took the part of Bobadil). Lewes's father was John Lee Lewes, about whom nothing at all has been known, except that he published two small volumes of poetry, fathered three boys, of whom G.H. Lewes was the youngest, and supposedly died in 1819, when Lewes was two years old. Lewes's mother was thought to have remarried some time between 1819 and 1825, becoming Mrs. Willim. The family lived a somewhat nomadic life during Lewes's first fifteen years, living now in Gloucestershire, now in Brittany, now in Jersey, and at last in London.

The huge gaps in the record of Lewes's earliest years presented me with my greatest problem. For it seemed I would have to begin my narrative of Lewes's life with nothing but blanks for the first sixteen years of it. Consequently, I set about trying to fill in the gaps, and was rewarded for many hours of speculative work with some successes. I penetrated the arcana of London's registries. I visited Somerset House, the Census Room, the Guildhall, and the Greater London Record Office, searching through the registers of births, deaths, and marriages. In the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane I delved into the wills and administrations proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury until 1858. Here I found, after much thumbing through documents, John Lee Lewes's will.

I found that John Lee Lewes did not die in 1819, but rather in 1831, in Liverpool. He was the father of Edgar, Edward, and George Henry Lewes, but he was not married to their mother, Elizabeth Ashweek. He had - in a dim foreshadowing of his more famous son's domestic arrangements - a wife and four children in Liverpool, whom he apparently abandoned to live with Elizabeth Ashweek. He then left her and his second, illegitimate, family shortly after G.H. Lewes's birth, emigrating to Bermuda, where he was a Customs Officer, the local poet, and Registrar of Slaves, before leaving the island in ill health to return to Liverpool, where he died in poverty in 1831.

The constant moving of the family during the 1820s, in particular its frequent stays in France and Jersey, suggests that there may have been money problems. It was cheaper to live almost anywhere outside England than in it, and the Lewes-Willim family spent some time in Boulogne, the favourite haven for the middle class in straightened circumstances. In *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp 'perched upon the French coast at Boulogne, that refuge of so much exiled English innocence'.

In short, Lewes picked up a shifting, unconventional education, which appears to have reached its formal end in 1832, when he was sixteen. But he also picked up a thorough knowledge of French, which he was to put to good use when reviewing French literature, philosophy, and history in the periodicals as a young man trying to make his way in literary London.

Having none of the usual advantages of money, good family, and a university education, Lewes launched himself into London literary life. Having no automatic entrée into any social group, he joined that circle least likely to object to an unconventional intrusion - the circle surrounding Leigh Hunt. Hunt, the ageing radical and Bohemian, erstwhile friend of, and sponger off, Byron and Shelley, was the magnet which attracted young men with radical opinions in politics and religion, and with no fortune or prospects. Most of these were worshippers of Shelley, affecting his way of wearing longish hair and open-necked shirts. Lewes was no exception.

Leigh Hunt made room for Lewes among his entourage. By publishing Lewes's early articles in his magazine, he set the young man on his miscellaneous and astonishing career. He also, through his eldest son Thornton, cast a long shadow on Lewes's future life. Both Hunts, father and son, were improvident, great borrowers of sovereigns, as Carlyle, who was their neighbour in Chelsea for years, knew to his cost. They were also picturesque, socially unconventional, gypsy-like; Carlyle described Leigh Hunt as 'one of the ancient Mendicant Minstrels, strangely washed ashore into a century he should not have belonged to'.

It was probably through Leigh Hunt that Lewes came to know Agnes Jervis in 1840. Her father was a radical MP and amateur littérateur; Lewes probably became a tutor in his household. In February 1841 he married Agnes; the groom was twenty-three, the bride eighteen. They settled in Kensington, and over the next seven years had five children, of whom three boys - Charles, Thornie (named after Thornton Hunt), and Bertie - survived infancy.

From letters which Lewes wrote to his German acquaintance Varnhagen von Ense, we know the marriage was happy for several years. Stories circulated, then and later, of a phalanstery, or experiment in communal living, in the house in Bayswater where Thornton Hunt lived with his wife and children and with another married couple. Lewes and Agnes were supposed by many to have been part of this household too. Mrs. Phillipson in her attack on Lewes alludes to his living in 'the brick and mortar and white stucco deserts of the far Bayswater'.

And here the biographer of Lewes faces another problem. Hearsay on the subject of these open marriages abounds, but no hard evidence that I know of exists. Documents, we know, have been lost or destroyed. Lewes's journals up to 1856 have disappeared. John Cross, whom George Eliot married after Lewes's death, destroyed her journals up to 1854. No letters survive from Agnes to Lewes, as far as I know; only one letter from Lewes to Agnes remains. Marian Evans's letters to Lewes have disappeared, and his letters to her were buried with her in Highgate Cemetery. (The temptation for the biographer to turn grave-robber here is severe, but I fear it can't happen outside the pages of a novel.)

Thus Lewes's biographer is in the position of having scarcely a single letter between Lewes and the two most important women in his life. To make up somewhat for this great gap in the records, however, there is a plethora of comments by their contemporaries about Lewes's relationships. Being observation and hearsay, and carrying the bias of their authors, they must be treated with caution, but they are evidence of a kind and can be brought to bear.

Let me now summarise briefly the results of my research on the early years of Lewes's life. It is clear that he and Agnes operated an open marriage; that Agnes bore the first of her children by Thornton Hunt in 1850; and that by 1851 Lewes was disillusioned by the experiment. My researches suggest that he and Marian became intimate earlier than has been thought - probably late in 1852. The documentation of their lives becomes very full for the years after their journey to Weimar together in 1854: two great collections of their manuscripts exist, one in the National Library of Scotland and the other at Yale. The problem for the biographer at this point ceases to be the lack of material and becomes almost a surfeit of it. Moreover, the story - since it now includes George Eliot - becomes familiar. The efforts of the biographer of Lewes must from now on be directed at allowing him to remain the chief subject of his own life, while at the same time giving due weight to the fact that this life was intimately bound up with George Eliot's. How far I have been successful in achieving this aim must be for readers of the biography to judge.