

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The George Eliot Review

English, Department of

1992

George Eliot's First Family: The Bartons of Shepperton

Michael Wolff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English](#), [British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Wolff, Michael, "George Eliot's First Family: The Bartons of Shepperton" (1992). *The George Eliot Review*. 187.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/187>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Michael Wolff

GEORGE ELIOT'S FIRST FAMILY: THE BARTONS OF SHEPPERTON

There are a lot of 'firsts' in the few months between September 1856 when Marian Evans Lewes began 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton' and February 1857 when she adopted George Eliot as a pseudonym. The Bartons were the first of her many families. The words of the title were, according to her own recollection, the first words of her new career. She was at the time in the process of making a new, it could be argued, a 'first family', in the new life she was sharing with George Henry Lewes and his young sons. And George Eliot, himself or herself, made a first appearance, born of the new Evans-Lewes family and already the bearer of the Bartons.

The creation of 'George Eliot' is the most important of a series of renamings which mark Mary Ann Evans's struggle to find a satisfactory family for herself. Mary Ann had been a lonely and misunderstood girl with little social identity outside the Evans family. After her father's death, finally free of family roles, she changed her given name from Mary Ann to the more adult Marian. Later, when she made her lifelong commitment to Lewes, she changed her family name to become Marian Evans Lewes. Now, the personal partnership with Lewes freed her to become George Eliot.

Finally willing and able to risk putting her creativity into print, Marian Evans looked to memory for material. But the memories of her family were as yet too painful. Indeed, as a child she had felt less at home with parents in Griff than in the countryside immediately around Griff. She chose local settings for the *Scenes of Clerical Life*, 'scenes' in which she had been born and raised, where as a child she had felt most secure and comfortable.

She chose 'clerical life' for her first story because the parish seemed to her the most natural of social organisms, and because through the clergy she could get the widest perspective on the whole village. And writing about the clergy lent itself to Marian Evans's wish to establish George Eliot's respectability. A return to her intense early immersion in religious and church affairs was an additional source of confidence. She began her first fiction with the village church because that was where she felt most secure as a writer. It was surely also one of the places where she felt safest as a child.

The opening paragraphs of 'Amos' contrast the past and present of Shepperton Church. For the narrator, the church, traditionally like a home, had once been personal and intimate, the familiar but dimly-lit setting evoking in the small child a pleasurable feeling of scariness. Now, many years later, the church has become a modern, efficient building, competent but cold, well-regulated but drained of vitality. It is no longer a home from home. The narrative looks back to a time halfway between the familial past and the inhospitable present.

Also suspended between the familial and the inhospitable is Amos Barton himself, the curate of Shepperton, George Eliot's most commonplace as well as her first protagonist. Amos's ordinariness is defined by what he is not. To both his family and his parishioners, he is a patriarch without authority. He is one of those 'mongrel, ungainly dogs, who are nobody's pets'. At best tolerated, at worst held in contempt, he is suspected by his parishioners of sexual scandal. The reader is early on invited to see him as a ghost, a black figure flitting through a churchyard, colourless and insubstantial almost to the point of nullity. But, we find out, he is returning to an angel-wife and five pattern children. Milly is not just Amos's complement; she is his opposite: 'a large, fair, gentle Madonna . . . a tall, graceful, substantial presence . . . imposing in its mildness'.

In 'Amos Barton' George Eliot tells a tale of a family at once united and divided, united by the circumstance and love but fictively divided into a domestic - maternal, presided over by the angelic but substantial Milly Barton, and a social - patriarchal, misgoverned by the all-too-real but insubstantial Amos Barton. The critical tradition reflects this paradox: Milly is treated as though she were the main character in a story named after her weak husband. But Milly seems to be at the centre of the narrative largely because Amos seems so marginal. And his inability to stay at the centre of his own story reflects his creator's sense that she had never been at the centre of her own life.

The story itself is about the two blows which make up Amos's sad fortunes. First, Milly dies in childbirth, weakened by genteel poverty and by having to put up with the countess, an unsought house-guest, whose presence intensifies the scandal around Amos. But, just as in life Milly blessed Amos by her presence and the children she gave him, so in death she blessed him by giving him his parish, which now comes to pity and love the pathetic widower.

Second, just as Amos begins to feel again some equivalent of the warmth of family, he is deprived of his curacy and exiled to a dingy, nameless town to be looked after and in some half-measure consoled by his eldest daughter Patty. His second parting from Milly, as he lies across her grave, is a more poignant and final repetition of the earlier death-bed scene.

The narrative story of Amos Barton is indeed focused on Milly's grave and on the surrounding village community of Shepperton. Milly is the main figure and Amos fades into the margin. Two quasi-families, Shepperton and the memory of Milly, remain at the centre. The substance of the story is embodied in Milly. Without her, Amos has been and is little more than a ghost. But, outside the narrative, Amelia Barton is the insubstantial mother whom Marian Evans never had, and it is Marian, identified with Amos in her sense of her own pathetic ordinariness, who submits to the loss of family and community and is exiled with Amos to the starker reality of the alien city. In this version, Milly is marginal and the forlorn Amos stays central against the movement of the narrative.

At the beginning of chapter 2, George Eliot comments on the necessity of illusion as a precondition of whatever good we can do. I think the narrator has already succumbed to

such an illusion in his nostalgic wish for the 'dear old quaintnesses' of his childhood church. The corresponding disillusionment lies in the spick-and-span efficiency of the modernized building. In illusion can be found the traditional lost world of Milly, a blurring of self and others and a sense of familial security provided by the presence of a father in the dependable form of a parson speaking to the community on behalf of God. In disillusionment is the world of Amos, the lonely, separated self of contemporary reality whose relation to others is always at risk and always conducted in an unprotected and fatherless world.

This tension between Milly's and Amos's stories, between asserted or narrative wish and felt fear, is an illuminating illustration of a pervasive feature of George Eliot's work (and of Marian Evans's life), namely, the tension of George Eliot the hopeful meliorist and Marian Evans the innate conservative. This tension is rooted, I believe, within larger conflicts specific to Victorian (and modern) culture, especially whether the family is a good thing or a bad. Moreover, there are equivalent tensions in the early life of Mary Ann Evans, especially about the presence and absence of her parents, about hoping for a family and fearing she didn't have one, hopes that inevitably led to Isaac, an inadequate parent-substitute. Isaac's marriage and her father's death reinforced a lifelong depression, and her despair about being part of a family and about achieving something was relieved only by her relationship with Lewes.

Already in 'Amos Barton' George Eliot appears to be saying that the sustaining of family and of a structured society is a necessity both for herself and for her readership. But she is also saying that such a necessity is, she fears, an illusion, that the world of the father has crumbled, that the family as an institution has become impossible and that the self, which is not fitted to stand alone, nevertheless is alone.

Marian Evans became George Eliot through a personal version of those displacements that, writ large, fractured Victorian ideology and haunt modern culture: she left her family, her home, her class, and, through 'George Eliot' and 'Mrs Lewes', her sex and her respectability. And, despite her sense of being unusually gifted, the displacements prompted her to write about and identify with those who were neither gifted nor unusual. There is social confusion about the family life throughout George Eliot's novels. The stability and nurturance of the idealized family are almost always subverted by her portrayal of actual families. And her ambivalent response to a culture that had few niches for exceptional women reveals her need for new understandings of gender and community. We still hope that the family can help us in the move from an apparently stable pre-modern culture to a more volatile one threatened by loss of both community and identity. George Eliot's fiction, beginning with the Bartons, is a unique and inexhaustible commentary on this move.