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The Role of George Henry Lewes in George Eliot's Career: A Reconsideration

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Abstract

This article examines the “protection” and “encouragement” George Henry Lewes provided to Eliot throughout her fiction-writing career. According to biographers, Lewes showed his selfless devotion to Eliot by encouraging her to begin and continue writing fiction; by fostering the mystery of her authorship; by managing her finances; by negotiating her publishing contracts; by managing her schedule; by hosting a salon to promote her books; and by staying close by her side for twenty-four years until death parted them. By reconsidering each element of Lewes’s devotion separately, Rilett challenges the prevailing construction of the Eliot–Lewes relationship as the ideal partnership of literary agent and author and the perfect marriage. Rilett’s revisionist interpretation seeks to open up Eliot’s fiction to productive new biographical readings for a new generation of scholars.

Keywords: George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, marriage, biography, nineteenth-century literary agents and authors

The biography of George Eliot,¹ produced by Gordon Haight in 1968, remains the most comprehensive summary of the letters, diaries, and other documents that count as evidence of her “real life.” Subsequent biographers have addressed Haight’s implicit interpretive biases, including a disapproval of feminism and nonnormative sexuality, and they have celebrated Eliot’s progressive, proto-feminist choices, including her defiance of her family’s religious doctrines, her independence as a single woman writer in London, and her determination to live openly with a man who was not her legal husband. Today’s interpretations of Eliot’s life reflect current values of female independence, so that she is now more often viewed as the “strong-minded woman”² than the woman “not fitted to stand alone.”³ Despite these updates to Eliot’s biography, Haight’s assessment—that without Lewes’s “protectiveness” and support, George Eliot “would probably have written nothing” (*GE* 369)—has remained essentially unchallenged, because biographers continue to mythologize the Eliot–Lewes marriage (as they always called their domestic partnership) as a perfect union.

There are no extant letters exchanged by Lewes and Eliot, nor have any journals survived from the years when they first became a couple. Nevertheless, we do find declarations of love and affection in the remaining journals and in outgoing correspondence to others. Most famously, Eliot proclaims her love for her "husband" in dedications on the first page of each of her fiction manuscripts, starting with *Adam Bede*, which Lewes had bound in leather and displayed proudly to their guests.⁴ Both Eliot and Lewes intentionally projected the picture of a perfectly happy marriage. These documents, along with the recollections of some contemporaries, such as Edith Simcox, have led all Eliot's biographers and major critics, including Gordon Haight, Barbara Hardy, Frederick Karl, Ina Taylor, Tim Dolan, Kathryn Hughes, Jennifer Uglow, Rebecca Mead, Kathleen McCormack, Rosemary Ashton, and Nancy Henry, to characterize the union as thoroughly happy. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's conclusions are typical: "Lewes was possibly the most supportive and loving companion a female author could wish for" (462). Phyllis Rose praises them as "the perfect married couple. Only—they weren't married" (221). Lewes's biographers have been no less effusive in their celebration of this partnership: "The closeness of their relationship, their tender understanding of each other were unflinching. It's hard to think of a marriage, legal or illegal, that lasted so well and with fewer hiccups" (Williams 5). These conclusions are reasonable, but do not fully represent the marriage in its entirety.

In general, critics agree that Lewes showed his selfless devotion to Eliot by encouraging her to begin and continue writing fiction; by fostering the mystery of her authorship; by managing her finances; by negotiating her publishing contracts; by managing her schedule; by hosting a salon to promote her books; and by staying close by her side for twenty-four years until death parted them. By reconsidering each element of Lewes's devotion separately, this article seeks to complicate the persistent characterization of this couple as exceptionally harmonious by showing there were issues on which they disagreed that have long been elided. These issues are important to acknowledge because they appear to have caused significant tensions in the relationship that affected Eliot's writing, both in terms of its production and content.⁵

Encouraging Eliot's First Story

Indisputably, George Henry Lewes encouraged George Eliot to try her hand at fiction in 1856 and then facilitated the publication of her first short story,

“The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton.” The prevailing biographical assumption, proposed by Ruby Redinger in 1975, is that Eliot began writing fiction out of a new sense of love and security. But another explanation is possible. Both Lewes and Eliot describe this momentous turning point with reference to Lewes’s initial doubts about her ability to write dramatically, though she had been writing and publishing nonfiction articles and reviews with success. Lewes sent Eliot’s completed manuscript to his current publisher, John Blackwood, along with a letter stating that he had overcome “considerable doubts of [his] friend’s power as a writer of fiction” but that after reading the completed story, he was impressed enough to send it (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 269). Though Lewes became a strong advocate *after* reading Eliot’s first story, it is arguably Lewes’s “considerable doubts” rather than his strong belief and confidence in his partner’s abilities that fueled the writing of Eliot’s first work of fiction, the story of Amos Barton and his unappreciated but devoted wife Milly.

The retrospective account Eliot wrote in her journal in December 1857, titled “How I Came to Write Fiction,” also emphasizes Lewes’s early doubts about the scope of her writing ability. The narrative arc of her retelling, however, differs from Lewes’s and may be seen to illuminate their different priorities. As Phyllis Rose recognizes, “the formulas with which we choose to present our actions are by no means a negligible part of them” (235). Eliot explains the move from article writing to fiction writing as something she had “always” considered (her word), but first she had to overcome obstacles—both her own and Lewes’s reservations about her talent (which she mentions thrice)—before she finally won her partner’s approval and surprising publication success.⁶ It is essentially the story of a woman’s validated self-esteem after winning a personal battle over discouragement. Her determination to earn Lewes’s respect and approval was rewarded, as was her aspiration to make a difference in the larger community; she hoped that by depicting real, erring, but well-intentioned humans, her stories would motivate readers to be kinder to one another.

Lewes’s version of Eliot’s start in fiction, in contrast, is a rags-to-riches turn of fortune, in which he admits his motivation for encouraging her first attempt was, at least partly, mercenary. Both were selling reviews and articles to periodicals, but nonfiction paid poorly in comparison to fiction, which could be sold in parts and then again as a collection. Unfortunately, Lewes’s own forays into fiction writing had not been critically or financially successful. The couple was very poor in 1856–57 with hardly enough to eat, and Lewes was deeply in debt.⁷ Lewes was obliged to pay financial support to his legal wife Agnes and the six children who bore his surname. Under English Common Law, he was also responsible for Agnes’s debts, which had

ballooned to £150 by the end of 1856—about half of Lewes's total earnings that year (Ashton, *GHL* 178–79). Just one month before Eliot began writing “Amos,” Lewes incurred the added expense of enrolling his eldest two sons in a Swiss boarding school. The crucible of Eliot's fiction writing career, then, which always has been construed as the perfect happiness of long-awaited loving companionship, was also a stressful time of financial need and other difficulties that shall be examined further in this article.

While Eliot does not reference the burden of poverty in her essay “How I Came to Write Fiction,” Lewes's accounts foreground their desperation. Benjamin Jowett, Margaret Holland, and Charles Eliot Norton all retell Lewes's story with financial need as a motivating factor. The story, as Jowett remembered it, was about Lewes's discovery of a workable solution to their money problems and his effective mentoring of a reluctant fiction writer.⁸ Fully endorsing Lewes's critical role, Jowett concludes: “had it not been for [Lewes's] sympathy she would never have written anything” (qtd. in Collins 51). Holland's account similarly includes Lewes's admission that he “used to reply that she was without the creative power” whenever friends mentioned that Eliot should write a novel, but because they were “very badly off” financially, he encouraged her to “try a story” (qtd. in Collins 51).⁹ Norton's brief account includes three references to the couples' extreme poverty as motivation for Lewes's encouragement (qtd. in Collins 50).¹⁰ Finally, in his own journal entry for January 1857, Lewes asserts that his resumption of contributions to *Blackwood's Magazine* “formed the proximate cause of Marian's introduction to fiction” (qtd. in Hirshberg 31). Lewes's emphasis on *his* contribution to Eliot's success, along with his confidently assertive self-regard, stressed the relationship over time, as this article will demonstrate. Lewes's retellings also reveal that he pressured Eliot to write fiction in order to pay his dependents' debts. Lewes's focus on money and other signs of his less-than-altruistic encouragement of Eliot's “dream” provides an early insight into their diverging financial expectations and values—areas of potential conflict that continued to surface even after her fiction had made them comfortably wealthy. These tensions, which are only hinted at in Eliot's letters and journals, become fully developed thematic concerns in her fiction.¹¹

Creating the enigma of “George Eliot”

The scheme devised by Eliot and Lewes to get her story published anonymously contributed to an already circumscribed social life for her. *Blackwood's Magazine* regularly published stories and articles without authorial

attribution, but it was unusual for a publisher not to know the identity of contributing authors (Henry, *Life* 103). Lewes's story about his mysterious author friend, which successfully captured Blackwood's interest, involved misrepresenting the storywriter's gender and implied occupation, and grossly exaggerating "his" extremely fragile temperament. According to Lewes, his friend's "shy, shrinking, ambitious nature" was so "unusually sensitive" that he might stop writing altogether at the barest hint of criticism (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 276–77). Lewes warned Blackwood in a subsequent letter that negative criticism could "easily" make the author "give it up," and he adds, "*Don't allude to this hint of mine. He wouldn't like my interfering*" (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 364; emphasis original). As this comment shows, Lewes recognized Eliot would not have appreciated his hyperbole and interference. Whether the exaggeration served Lewes, Eliot, or both is a difficult question to untangle.

It is nearly impossible to recognize the assured, assertive essay writer, reviewer, and de facto editor of the *Westminster Review* in Lewes's description of Eliot. Before Lewes assumed the role of the strict mentor who would, she said, "tell me when I write what ought to be put behind the fire" (Eliot, *GEL* 5: 451), Eliot had been fiercely independent in her opinions of her own work and the work of contributors. Even John Chapman, her employer at the *Review*, had received sharp critique. By characterizing Eliot as morbidly sensitive, Lewes ensured that "if Blackwood had any problems with Eliot's manuscripts, these would be conveyed to him [Lewes] first," an intervention that critic Moira Gatens praises as nurturing, protective, and "unconventionally feminine" (34), though one might, quite reasonably, view Lewes's behavior oppositely, as dominant and controlling.

Lewes described his shy writer friend to Blackwood in terms that emphasize an imbalance of power in the relationship: "He (very judiciously!) looks up to my critical opinion as oracular; but in spite of confidence in me is so diffident of himself, that I had to bully him into acquiescence with the fact that I had discovered a genius. I cackle over my hatched chick; and so may you" (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 295). Lewes exaggerates and jokes about discovering a cowering genius who recognizes Lewes's "critical opinion as oracular" but still must be bullied into accepting his destiny. Despite the light tone, there may be a kernel of concerning truth in Lewes's self-described "bully[ing]" and "cackl[ing] over" a reluctant participant, as Blackwood seems to have noticed. Finally meeting the author a year after publishing her fiction, Blackwood observed, "She was looking a little worn and I think Lewes fidgets her in his anxiety both about her and her work and himself" (Eliot, *GEL* 6: 253). Suggesting that Lewes's "fidgeting" about Eliot's career was wearing

on her, and that Lewes was more anxious about “her and her work” than he ought to be, Blackwood seems slightly concerned. However, he had no concrete reason to doubt Lewes’s warnings—that “Some people’s Pegasus seems to have the mouth (as well as the pace) of a cart horse; but your thoroughbred—all bone and nerve—requires other treatment” (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 448). Lewes’s metaphor of mastering a horse sounds ominously similar to the way Eliot describes Grandcourt’s management of Gwendolen’s free will in *Daniel Deronda*.¹² If Eliot resented her partner’s interventions (a hypothesis that is ultimately unprovable, given the extant “nonfiction” evidence), then she channeled these frustrations into her fiction, where strong, formerly assertive heroines, such as Dorothea, Gwendolen, and Romola, learn to endure their dominating husbands in silence.

Just as the decision to try writing fiction had been, in part, financially motivated, so was the decision to continue hiding the author behind the pseudonym “George Eliot” for as long as possible. As Lewes reminded Blackwood, “Your own experience must have shown you the immense advantage there is in a mystery about authorship” (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 506). Furthermore, if the author had been exposed as Lewes’s mistress (rather than “Mrs. Lewes,” the other pseudonym she was calling herself), the newfound success of this publishing team would have slipped away. Though Lewes, Blackwood, and Eliot herself had determined to keep the secret indefinitely, the painful “mask of my incognito,” as she called it, was bound to slip (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 424). Following the best-selling success of *Adam Bede* that made the mysterious “George Eliot” a much-sought celebrity, Eliot and Lewes finally had to confess the truth to their friends.

During those first two years and eight months (September 1856 through June 1859) of her fiction-writing career, however, the multilayered deception was maintained by a great deal of sacrifice, especially on Eliot’s part.¹³ After what most biographers consider a “honeymoon” excursion in Germany, Lewes and Eliot returned to England in 1855 to live together as if married. Eliot bore the brunt of the scandal. Victorian society accepted Lewes as a philandering but lovable rake, as evidenced by his continued attendance at dinner parties in friends’ homes and in London’s social clubs, whereas Eliot was considered Lewes’s mistress and famously could not be “invited to dinner” (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 214).¹⁴ Before moving in with Lewes in 1855, Eliot had enjoyed an active social life, regularly attending theater and opera productions, dinners with friends and colleagues (even attending when she was the only woman invited), and Chapman’s salons in the Strand. After 1855, Eliot’s lifestyle changed drastically. In the first eighteen months after returning to England with Lewes, for example, she had gone to town three times and to the

theater only once, and nowhere without Lewes (Haight 210). She no longer made visits or went out in public, and only a very few former friends came to visit her.¹⁵ In a rare moment of recorded “bitterness” (Haight’s term), Eliot wrote “that she would never have any *friends* again, only *acquaintances*” (Haight 299; emphasis original).¹⁶ She did have friends, but this comment provides insight into Eliot’s suffering.

Becoming “George Eliot” necessitated greater secrecy and hiding, even from those few who continued to see her. Lewes, who reveled in the publicity generated by the gossip, encouraged speculation about *Adam Bede*’s authorship, including writing letters to the *Times* as Eliot to refute others claiming authorship while keeping the mystery before the public (Haight 283). Lewes also outright lied about it to their inner circle of friends; to Chapman, for example, Lewes denied unequivocally that Eliot had written the novel. He justified his lies by arguing that the questions put to him were “simple curiosity” and not “warrantable” (Eliot, *GEL* 3: 12). Eliot herself contributed to speculation about other possible authors, but she would not directly lie and, according to her good friend Emily Davies, Eliot was unaware that Lewes had crossed that line, and she “did not support his view” (qtd. in Collins 65).¹⁷

After *Adam Bede* was published in 1859 to tremendous critical and popular acclaim, and the “whole town was ringing with applause,” Eliot could tell no one about her success. As Lewes reported to Blackwood, she was “almost sad instead of joyful.” Attempting to explain her strange response, Lewes added, “but the sadness lies near joy—and you will understand the effect on such a nature” (qtd. in Haight 279). As Haight recognizes, about this time Eliot slipped into a depression that lasted approximately three years, during which she “complained of ‘physical weakness,’ ‘feeble body,’ ‘heavy eyes and hands,’ and other vague symptoms; worst of all was a state of mental depression” (337–38). While Haight attributes Eliot’s malaise to her constant dislike of life in London and her longing for a quiet home in the country, her symptoms also could have been manifestations of the stress under which she toiled in obscurity. During this difficult period, Eliot wrote *The Lifted Veil*, “Brother Jacob,” *Silas Marner*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and she started *Romola*.

Managing the Money

Lewes’s biographers praise him for taking care of the money matters so that Eliot could concentrate on writing, but there is another way to consider his assistance. The scheme invented to facilitate anonymous publication of

her first story led directly to Eliot's losing control of her own income. The transfer began out of necessity: in order to obscure "George Eliot's" identity, Lewes opened a bank account in his own name and instructed Blackwood to deposit her earnings there. This practice continued, however, not only after the couple revealed her identity to Blackwood the following year, but throughout the rest of their lives together. It was the most convenient way for Lewes to pay Agnes's debts. Increasingly, Lewes relied on Eliot's writing income to support his entire family, including Agnes, his children, his mother, his brother's widowed wife, and his nephew.¹⁸

Eliot's journalism earnings were supplemented by an inheritance from her father's estate, which was paid semiannually. According to biographer Ruby Redinger, Eliot's motivation for confessing the "fact" of her "marriage" to her brother Isaac was primarily financial. Redinger astutely argues that the letter was written because "Isaac needed to know her whereabouts so that [the couple] could receive the income from her inheritance" (Redinger 337). They needed money while they were traveling for Lewes's scientific studies in the spring of 1857.¹⁹ By letter, she proposed that because she was now "married," it would be more convenient if Isaac would be "kind enough to pay [her] income to the account of Mr. G. H. Lewes, into the Union Bank of London, Charring Cross Branch, 4, Pall Mall East, Mr. Lewes having an account there" (*GEL* 2: 332, qtd. in Redinger 339). That Eliot instructed both Blackwood and her brother to deposit all of her income into Lewes's account is clear, but the existing letters and journals do not reveal how the couple arrived at this decision. It is curious that the letter of confession and instruction to Isaac, as well as the next letter to Vincent Holbeche, the lawyer who responded on Isaac's behalf, are copied in Lewes's hand (Redinger 340). Redinger speculates that Lewes copied Eliot's letter after she wrote it, but it is just as likely that Lewes wrote the original letter and Eliot copied and sent what he composed. In any case, informing Isaac of her "marriage" may have seemed a practical choice, but its result was catastrophic for Eliot. In consequence of this offending letter, Isaac broke off all contact with his sister for twenty-three years—the pain of which is clearly evident in Eliot's autobiographical *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and the "Brother and Sister" sonnet series (1869), with their fond recollections of days when the siblings had clasped their "little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together" (*Mill* 2:400).²⁰ Her response to Isaac's letter of reconciliation after Lewes's death in 1878 is telling; she wrote, "[I]t was a great joy to me to have your kind words of sympathy, for our long silence has never broken the affection for you which began when we were little ones" (Eliot, *GEL* 7: 287).

Having all her income in Lewes's account became especially problematic for Eliot after Lewes died in 1878. Specifically, “[b]oth their homes—in London and in Witley—were in his name alone, as were all her earnings, along with securities worth more than £30,000” (Maddox 191). Apart from Eliot's earnings, Lewes's estate was valued less than £2,000, including his copyrights, which he left to his sons (Haight 523). Because the couple had never legally married and because Agnes Lewes was still living, transferring the money to Eliot was exceptionally complicated. Ironically, as a single woman, the properties, investments, and bank accounts could have been held legally in her own name, but they were not. Eliot had been signing herself (illegally) as Marian Evans Lewes—the name, presumably, she would have wanted associated with Lewes's memorial scholarship—so as part of the whole process, she ended up officially changing her name with a contract called a “deed poll.” Consequently, she “took the added name of Lewes, and with another transfer got possession of her own property” (Haight 523).

The embarrassing circumstances were made worse by the fact that Lewes's will was published in the newspaper. Thus, the original scandal of the couple's illicit living arrangements was unfortunately and unnecessarily revived. George Simpson, Blackwood's Edinburgh manager, lamented, “Poor George Eliot, how the thought of her haunts me! I heard that she had to appear in Court to prove Lewes's will and to sign “Marian Evans.” Could not the possibility of such a trial have been provided against?” (Eliot, *GEL* 7: 389n213). Even Eliot's estranged siblings felt sorry and angry for her when they read the published will.²¹ Biographers Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston are surely right to contend,

It is inconceivable that this business could have been conducted without her feeling humiliated. There is a glimpse of GE's suffering at having to endure legal process to get access to her wealth in her calculations in GH's account book, which shows the extent to which her earnings contributed not only to his maintenance, but also to the support of Agnes and her children and several other Lewes relations. (Eliot, *Journals* 150–51; abbreviations original)

Whether it was a collaborative decision or one she felt coerced into making, granting Lewes exclusive access to all her income ultimately caused Eliot a great deal of stress, and could have cost her her entire fortune. If she was not happy with the arrangement, having Lewes manage all their money could have been a serious point of conflict. The following consideration of their respective ideas about wealth may shed light on this possibility.

The Art of the Deal: *Romola*

Eliot and Lewes held very different opinions on how much money was necessary for a comfortable living, a divergence that is most clearly illustrated by their respective responses to George Smith's publication offer for *Romola*. After *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Silas Marner* were published in quick succession to critical and popular acclaim, all involved recognized that Eliot's next manuscript would be an especially valuable commodity. Eliot was confident that Blackwood would be willing to remunerate her for her increased success. As Haight has argued, "[i]t would be hard to imagine a more considerate publisher than John Blackwood" (357). From her first story through each successive work, Blackwood had been generous, even paying her a bonus beyond their contracted agreement for *Adam Bede*, after that novel became a best seller. Opening a frank discussion of the "money question" with him, Eliot wrote, "I don't want the world to give me anything for my books except money enough to save me from the temptation to write only for money" (*GEL* 3: 151-52).²² She repeatedly reassured Blackwood throughout negotiations for *Mill* that he should "not consider what others would give for the purposes of assisting them in their speculations but simply what was likely to produce a fair profit to [him]self with a good sum for her." Reporting Eliot's assurances to his brother, Blackwood added, "She means what she says too I think. Lewes is much the keener of the two" (qtd. in Haight 317). Blackwood was right about Lewes, who had been writing him exaggerated letters with mild threats, such as: "My precious time is occupied with declining offers on all sides—every one imagining he can seduce George Eliot," to which Blackwood's colleague responded, "I say no wonder when Mr. Lewes has shown them the way" (qtd. in Haight 314). Though Blackwood's offer for *Mill* prevailed, Lewes was determined to secure an even more lucrative deal for Eliot's next novel.

As progress continued on what they were calling the "Italian novel," Blackwood was led to expect he would be offered first refusal of *Romola*. Lewes was shopping the unfinished manuscript, however, and when rival publisher George Smith, of Smith, Elder, and Company, offered an unheard-of sum of £10,000 to publish it, Lewes pushed Eliot to accept it. At first, she refused outright. Her response to Smith's original offer, which shocked and frustrated Lewes, shows a clear break in their usually united front. As Lewes reported, "[It was] the most magnificent offer ever yet made for a novel" and yet "Polly [Eliot], as usual was disinclined to accept it" (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 17-18). Eliot admitted that the offer "made [her] think about money," but ultimately she decided, "it is better for me not to be rich" (Eliot, *Journals*

108). Nevertheless, Smith was persistent, and he found another way to motivate the coveted author.

Three months after his first “magnificent offer” for *Romola*, Smith offered Lewes a position as consulting editor of the *Cornhill* magazine, for £600 per year, stipulating that Lewes would have to do very little work for that sum. Lewes recorded his delight in his journal: “This is very handsome, as the work promises to be light, and not disagreeable” (qtd. in Baker 341n). But there does seem to have been a catch to Smith’s proposal: in his letter accepting the deal, Lewes not only mentions that his “position must be absolved from all responsibility beyond my own judgement and acts; and to have none of the *representative* duties,” but also that he has not yet mentioned the arrangement to Eliot, so “don’t say a word about it before her on Thursday,” when the three would meet. Lewes adds a highly revealing postscript to this job acceptance letter to Smith, which no biographical accounts mention:

This it is: If I join you my first thought naturally will be the strength of the Magazine and therefore I should endeavor to persuade Mrs. Lewes to publish her new work in it—as soon as possible and prudent—It might be *announced* as soon as we resolved on it. Two or three months expectation would do good. She is, as you know, reluctant and diffident, but she will I am pretty sure be guided by my wishes, even against her own preference for the other form of publication. (*GHL* 2: 33–34; emphasis original)

The deal Lewes cut with Smith, then, included a high-paying, light-working job for himself, along with a plot to secure Eliot’s next novel, *Romola*, for Smith’s *Cornhill* magazine. Lewes is confident that his wife will be “guided by [his] wishes, even against her own preference,” which is exactly what happened. She gave in to the pressure of Lewes and Smith, and within two weeks was writing to tell Blackwood the news. Curiously, Eliot would not accept the full amount because it was more money than she judged was fair payment for the work. Smith was incredulous that in response to his generous offer, Lewes “seconded me heart and soul . . . But George Eliot was immovable; and, much to Lewes’s disgust, instead of paying £10000 for ‘Romola,’ I paid her 7500. Its author threw away 2500 on what many people would think a literary caprice, but what she regarded as an act of loyalty to her canons of art” (qtd. in Collins 73–74). Indeed, Eliot wrote to Sara Hennell, “I have refused the highest price ever offered for fiction,” indicating firmly that she was not mercenary-minded—an aim that she found distasteful (*GEL* 4: 28).

Though Eliot does not explain her decision further, in the *Romola* transaction, she held some ground against Lewes's protests and his reported "disgust" with her refusal of the full offer. She finally accepted an amount approximately halfway between what Smith and Blackwood were offering. Another choice she made to show she was not motivated by the money was to offer her short story "Brother Jacob" to Smith for publication in the *Cornhill* at no additional charge. Though Blackwood felt he was undeservedly deserted, he blamed "the voracity of Lewes" (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 38). He believed Eliot had acted against her own inclination and had been swayed by Lewes's "extortionist views" (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 38n3). Neither publisher seems to have appreciated Eliot's compromises, which, apparently, had helped her live with her decision to leave Blackwood. Her choices indicate that it was more important to her to maintain harmonious relationships with both publishers than to secure the most money possible for her writing.

Eliot evidently felt guilty about leaving Blackwood, as indicated by a report Blackwood wrote to his brother of a few private moments he shared with her. Shortly after the "defection," as Blackwood called it (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 38), he visited the couple. He notes that "Lewes was taken unwell while I was with them yesterday and she accompanied me down stairs to speak" where she confessed that she "must accept the enormous offer that had been made—that she could never feel to another publisher as she felt toward me—that the pleasure was gone in the matter and she did not feel sure now whether she had acted right" (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 44). Had Lewes been present throughout the visit, Blackwood implies, she would not have openly questioned "whether she had acted right." Blackwood declares that he shook her hand and tersely cut short her confession, uninterested in hearing what she had to tell him. He probably realized the contract was not likely to be reversed and he preferred not to involve himself further with the couple's apparent conflict. The encounter affected Blackwood enough to write of it to his brother the next day. Through this difficult period in their triangulated relationship, Blackwood remained friendly, and when Smith ended up losing money on *Romola*, Blackwood was pleased to take back his star author, who stayed with him for the rest of her career. The Smith deal suggests Eliot and Lewes disagreed on not only publishing *Romola* with Smith, but also on the more significant question of where to draw the line between having enough and having an excessive amount of wealth. These conflicting attitudes toward money do not necessarily mean that the marriage was inharmonious, but this realization should complicate our notion that the union was ideal in every way.

Career administration

Eliot's biographers all credit Lewes with keeping his sensitive and self-doubting partner writing. As Lewes explained to Blackwood and Eliot's friends, he strictly enforced a policy of "rigidly exclud[ing] all public criticism from her sight" (Eliot, *GEL* 5: 244). His standard practice was to scan the periodicals that were delivered each morning and cut out any reviews or references to her work before she was permitted to read them. Lewes sometimes read aloud part of a clipping, but as Eliot explained to Catherine Spence, a review author who had visited them, he did this "only on rare occasions" and otherwise kept them "in the drawer he assigns to any writing about me that gives him satisfaction. For he feels on my behalf more than I feel on my own—at least, in matters of this kind" (*GEL* 9: 182–83). Though Eliot makes clear in several letters that she gratefully accepted "his [Lewes's] rule of never letting me see what is written about myself" (*GEL* 5: 334–35), it appears to have been originally Lewes's decree which he enforced, presumably, because it seemed to fit with his characterization of her as excessively sensitive and liable to quit writing at the slightest hint of criticism. In writing back to an admirer, Alexander Main (after intercepting his letter to Eliot), Lewes deems himself a "psychologist" and proceeds to diagnose her extreme sensitivity as pathology (Eliot, *GEL* 5: 228).²³ Lewes may have been right in his diagnosis of what we might think of today as neurosis, but this condition was seemingly exacerbated, rather than alleviated, while Eliot lived with Lewes; similarly, he may have been right in his prescription to censor her reading of any writings about her works, but it is also possible to read his "protectiveness" as wildly excessive and overbearing.

Eliot was able to produce as much excellent fiction as she did, according to some biographers, because Lewes kept her writing when she would have otherwise quit. There is no direct evidence that this is true, although Lewes does seem to have exerted plenty of influence over her writing schedule, including ensuring that no visitors interrupted her. Eliza Lynn Linton, a longtime acquaintance of both Eliot and Lewes, believed Eliot would have soaked up knowledge with her "superb intelligence" but never produced any of her literary treasures had she not been "[i]mpelled by the force of circumstances to active labour" and not had "the encouragement given her by Mr. Lewes." Selecting a line from Eliot's letter to Sara Hennell (which had been reprinted in Cross's *Life*)—"My idle brain wants lashing to work like a negro, and will do nothing under a slighter stimulus" (*GEL* 2: 318)—Linton affirms, "this was too truly the case" ("GE" 518). Linton seems to be insisting that Lewes was a taskmaster who needed, metaphorically, to

lash the author to get her to work, though Linton admits that others may have seen “the case” differently. Eliot’s slave metaphor is enigmatic. Linton’s reuse of the excerpt, even in relation to her approval of Lewes’s tactics, is reminiscent of Alexander Ewing’s observation, though he draws the opposite conclusion about Lewes’s “encouragement.” Ewing states his hope that the musical concerts Eliot attended were “a real comfort to her great soul (for Lewes cannot be that, I am sure of) and she is worked harder than any carthorse” (qtd. in Collins 128). Only the couple involved knows the reality of their married relations, of course, but outsiders occasionally sense an extremely unbalanced power dynamic. Though they do not share their reasons, Linton and Ewing apparently perceived Lewes as a hard master to serve.

There is substantial evidence of Lewes’s heavy-handed management of Eliot’s writing. For example, Lewes occasionally became impatient with the amount of time she spent researching her projects, and would intervene when he thought she should have already begun her story. He seems less concerned about her art in this moment than in getting the publication submitted in a timely fashion (and getting paid for it). As she was preparing to write *Romola*, Lewes became anxious that she had insufficiently progressed on the novel, so he asked Blackwood to intercede. In December 1861, Lewes wrote him, “Polly is still deep in her researches. Your presence will I hope act like a stimulus to her to make her begin . . . This between ourselves. When you see her, mind your care is to discountenance the idea of a Romance being the product of an Encyclopaedia” (Eliot, *GEL* 3: 473–74). Blackwood followed Lewes’s direction and afterward reported, “[Lewes] and I were reproaching her for not fairly beginning to write and she defended herself by saying, ‘Well I have notes for a great many scenes.’ . . . She seems to be studying her subject as subject never was studied before” (Eliot, *GEL* 3: 474). The couple was already very well off financially from the successes of the four previous works, so there was no apparent reason for Lewes to pressure Eliot’s pacing.

Lewes requested Blackwood’s intervention again while Eliot was preparing to write *Middlemarch*; Lewes complained, “I am hard at work and wish she were; but she simmers and simmers, despairs and despairs . . . A word from you may give her momentary confidence. Once let her begin and on she will go of her own impulse” (Eliot, *GEL* 6: 11). Lewes also intruded forcefully when he thought Eliot was not revising *The Spanish Gypsy* quickly enough. Clearly frustrated, Eliot wrote in her journal, “Ill with bilious headache, and very miserable about my soul as well as body. *George has taken my drama away from me*” (*Journals* 123; emphasis original). The entry ends here, but the underscoring of the final sentence speaks volumes. These examples of

Lewes attempting to control or influence what or when Eliot was writing, regardless of his motives,²⁴ are further indications that the partnership was not always in perfect harmony.

Eliot and Lewes spent most of their time at home together in very close proximity, even after they purchased enormous houses. Their daily routine when they were in England (as opposed to the long excursions they would make to the Continent for research, wellness, and vacations) varied little over their years together. Typically, they would write in the mornings, would take a long walk after lunch, and then in the evenings, Lewes usually would dine out at his clubs, and/or visit colleagues and friends. After he returned, the couple often would read aloud to one another. She went nowhere without him and when she had a visitor, whether friend or acquaintance, Lewes frequently joined the conversation or sat close enough to hear it and interject. A visitor to the Priory, Steele MacKay, recalls, "Lewes sat glowering at [him] all the time [he] was there," during his appointment to speak with Eliot about his new dramatization of *Silas Marner*. While "she seemed to have taken a real interest" in MacKay's adaptation and listened appreciatively for three hours, immediately following the meeting, Lewes wrote MacKay to state that she did not want the novel dramatized after all. The rebuffed playwright thought Lewes "outrageously egotistical and so void of good taste as to even bully the woman—who has sacrificed everything for him—before me" (qtd. in Collins 84–85). Though MacKay's response was probably influenced by "sour grapes" and should be considered the opinion of an outsider who spent only a few hours with the couple, it does represent another contemporary's impression of Lewes as a "bully" toward Eliot.

Eliot's celebrity status in the last decade of her life enabled her to socialize more normally than during the first half of her relationship with Lewes, but even then, her activities with friends were circumscribed. Throughout the marriage, the couple maintained an unusual "rule" that she did not make visits, even to those who willingly defied social taboos and invited her. This behavior would have been considered a shocking breach of etiquette in Victorian London, where visits were expected to be returned. Georgianna Burne-Jones recalled that she and her husband were occasionally invited to the couple's home for dinner, but that Lewes and Eliot "never dined out" (qtd. in Collins 56). This was not strictly true, but unless they were traveling abroad, Eliot rarely dined out with Lewes. Annie Fields remembered Lewes explicitly explaining the rule when he called on her without his famous wife (qtd. in Collins 97–99). As he declined mailed invitations on her behalf, Lewes sometimes provided variations on this explanation, such as: "Ever since we came to live in London, Mrs. Lewes has been forced to adopt the rigorous rule of not going out, nor returning calls, except to friends

living out of town. On no other condition would life have been practicable, (that is peaceful and workful)" (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 489).

Lewes even forbade visits to their upper-class acquaintances. For example, Lady Amberley, a visitor in 1867, was told about the "no visits" rule; Lewes reports in his journal, "she wanted us to go back and lunch with her; but this was against rules, so she is to come to us next Sunday" (qtd. in Haight 390). Apparently, the restriction was only for Eliot, as Lewes attended a dinner and a garden party at the Amberleys' home at least twice in the following two weeks without her (Haight 391). Out-of-town visits were often curtailed as well. Before living with Lewes, Eliot used to visit her closest friends, the Brays and Sara Hennell, for weeks at a time. Their "Rose-hill" was Eliot's home-away-from-home. After she began living with Lewes, however, she never accepted another invitation from them. Thus, an oddly "rigorous rule" precluded much of the socializing Eliot might have enjoyed, and while it was helpful in allowing her to focus on her research and writing, it also enforced her isolation and may have contributed to her frequent bouts of depression.

In general, Eliot preferred to have companionship, rather than being alone. The in-person tête-à-tête conversation with a good friend (or with Lewes) is mentioned many times over the years of her letter writing as a favorite activity. The precept against London visits did not always apply, and occasionally the couple would accept a lunch or dinner invitation, but Eliot rarely went anywhere without Lewes. As one friend observed, "It is rather unfortunate that they are so inseparable" (qtd. in Haight 300). She was apparently unable or unwilling to go out without Lewes even when he was out of town for an extended period. He would leave for a week or two at a time to take the water cures at health spas on the continent, or to spend time with friends such as the Helps family at Vernon Hill, or to visit his sons at school in Switzerland. In a letter written the day after Lewes had departed for a two-week trip to Germany, Eliot tried to explain the rule that kept her home to Maria Congreve, who sensed her dear friend's depression and offered to take her out. Eliot's response is telling:

It is very good and sweet of you to propose to come round for me on Sunday, and I shall cherish particularly the remembrance of that kindness. But on reading your letter, Mr Lewes objected, on grounds which I think just, to my going to any public manifestation without him, since [the reason for] his absence could not be divined by outsiders. / I am companioned by dyspepsia, and feel life a struggle under the leaden sky. (*GEL* 4: 413)

Though Eliot claims to see the justice in Lewes's proscription, there is a sense of lonesome resignation to a rule she cannot or will not fully explain. This comment may be read as Eliot covering for her own social discomfort or as an allusion to the restrictions Lewes placed on her. Her reference to dyspepsia is common; Eliot regularly mentions minor physical ailments when confessing a low mood.²⁵ Part of Eliot's response to Congreve—"on reading your letter, Mr. Lewes objected"—may offer a clue, as will be explained next, to understanding the few direct complaints we find in Eliot's correspondence.

Managing the Mail

George Eliot's biographers have always assumed that she was in full agreement with Lewes's policies and practices concerning her career. If she had not been pleased with his protective management, one may reasonably ask, why are there not more obvious protests in her letters and journal entries? I contend that Eliot was reluctant to criticize Lewes in her letters because he was reading them, and she knew it. In 1873, she slips into a letter to her friend, Elma Stuart, the important but subtle message that it was Lewes's standard practice to open and read her letters. She writes, "When I came down to breakfast the other day I found my husband's face radiant over your letter (ex officio he opens all my letters); and I wish you could have witnessed his emotion in reading it aloud to me" (*GEL* 5: 375). Her explanation of Lewes's behavior as "ex officio" implies that he opened her mail in his official capacity, perhaps as her business manager. One can imagine that, as Eliot's assumed literary agent, he might screen her fan mail as he had scanned the newspapers and journals for reviews of her works before passing a few of them along to her, but that is not what Eliot is telling Elma. She is giving Elma a subtle warning that Lewes is reading *all* her mail. Surely, Lewes would have recognized Elma's frequent letters from France, which she often sent along with homemade gifts. Elma's letters began as "fan mail," but the epistolary relationship had deepened quickly into a spiritual mother-daughter bond. Lewes was opening and reading the letters of his wife's dear friend.

Outsiders also knew (or suspected) that Lewes was reading all her letters, and some apparently questioned whether Lewes's motives were "sincere." Eliza Lynn Linton, who knew Eliot and Lewes before they were a couple and who visited them on multiple occasions over the years,²⁶ recalled that "Mr Lewes read all her letters before he handed them to her, keeping

from her everything that might pain or annoy her. Indeed, his devotion to her was as complete as I, for one, believe it to have been sincere" (*Literary Life* 102). Linton suggests that while others may not have believed Lewes's devotion was "sincere," Linton herself did not question Lewes's motivation for censoring his partner's mail. Neither did another author friend, Margaret O. W. Oliphant, who seems to have been a little jealous of the assistance Lewes provided to Eliot's career: "Should I have done better if I had been kept, like [George Eliot], in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?" (5). Oliphant's comment is frequently dismissed as the envious whining of a rival author who had to support herself and her family on her writing after her husband's early death, but her observation of Eliot as a "kept" woman who was tended and cared for as she wrote her masterpieces shows that Oliphant, like Linton, viewed Lewes's behavior as positive, but also as extraordinarily protective.

There are further indications in some of Eliot's letters that confirm Lewes opened and read mail addressed to her from good friends, and that the pattern began early in their relationship. Before Eliot asked her friends to address her as "Mrs. Lewes," she encouraged them to insert their letters to her inside those addressed to "Mr. Lewes." This decision gave Lewes access and tacit permission to act as the intermediary between Eliot and her friends, just as he had positioned himself between Eliot and her publisher. He intercepted at least two letters addressed to "Miss Evans" from two of Eliot's closest friends—one from Bessie Parkes and another from Barbara Leigh Smith. Lewes's reply to Leigh Smith is especially striking: "But, dear Barbara, you must not call her Marian Evans again: that individual is extinct, rolled up, mashed, absorbed in the Lewesian magnificence!" (Eliot, *GEL* 3: 64). Lewes's tone throughout his letter is light and joking, but his message is a little ominous—was Eliot's individual identity being made "extinct, rolled up, mashed, [and] absorbed" by her overprotective partner?

Even after her friends learned to address their letters to "Mrs. Lewes," Lewes was reading them before he passed them on. On at least one occasion, Lewes intentionally "mis-laid" a letter from Sara Hennell and then replied to it himself. Lewes admits to Hennell he had deliberately "contrived she should not see your letter" and he continues to warn her against writing to Eliot about reviews of her books (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 58–59). He explains further:

Of course you will take no notice of this letter. I only wanted to explain a general principle à propos of a particular case. The principle is this: never tell her anything that other people say about her books, for good or evil; unless of course it should be something exceptionally gratifying to her—something you know

would please her apart from its being praise. She would like to know for instance when you or Mrs. Bray sympathize with and like her books. But even this should be conveyed only in a general intimation. You can tell me any details (I'm a glutton in all that concerns her, though I never look after what is said about myself) favorable or unfavorable; but for her let her mind be as much as possible fixed on her art and not on the public. (Eliot, *GEL* 4: 58–59)

Lewes's letter to Hennell, excerpted above, suggests that he infantilized his genius partner and attempted to micromanage her responses to even the most benign external influences. His statements—"No one speaks about her books to her but me," and "Of course you will take no notice of this letter"—are assertive and commanding. Although Lewes assures Hennell he is doing it all out of loving concern, he positions himself as the expert who knows best about what the author needs, and he presumes that Hennell, one of Eliot's closest friends since her Coventry days, could not know without being told explicitly.²⁷ Lewes's unwarranted final comment—that he is "a glutton in all that concerns her, though [he] never look[s] after what is said about [him]self"—is interesting because it reveals the opposite of what he intends: Lewes *is* comparing himself to his much more famous spouse, even as he avers looking for reviews of his own work. He may even be hinting at the fact that his writing receives little notice in comparison to hers, though he never admits to feeling jealous of her success.²⁸ Instead, he thinks of her novels as "ours" and their success as collaborative, which is at least partly true, but may have been irksome to Eliot, one can imagine, after all the sacrifices she was making to produce her art.

Lewes apparently monitored not only Eliot's incoming but also her outgoing mail. After Eliot wrote a letter to her close friend Barbara Leigh Smith, Lewes added a second postscript (after one he presumably showed to Eliot). His instructions to Bodichon relate closely to the lecture he directed at Hennell, in which he had insisted she must follow his censorship rules when writing to her friend:

P.P.S. Entre nous. Please don't write or tell Marian anything unpleasant that you hear unless it is important for her to hear it. She is so very sensitive, and has such a tendency to dwell on and believe in unpleasant ideas that I always keep them from her. What other people would disregard or despise sinks into her mind. She knows nothing of this second postscript, of course. (Eliot, *GEL* 3: 106)

Lewes wrote letters and postscripts to some of Eliot's closest friends as early as 1857, long before Eliot was famous enough to require a secretary to open masses of fan mail to which Lewes also replied, often to the writer's chagrin.²⁹

Another example of Lewes's response to a personal letter addressed to Eliot was one he wrote to William Hale White, a fellow writer and friend from their *Westminster Review* days. In 1876, White's attempt to reconnect with his old friend was answered not by Eliot, but by Lewes, whose four-sentence reply to Hale begins, "Mrs. Lewes is so much occupied just now that I relieve her from all correspondence that is not exclusively personal" (Eliot, *GEL* 6: 248). As John Rignall has demonstrated, White always cherished his memories of their friendship, and after her death, "could write of his love for George Eliot" in his "quasi-autobiographical fiction *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881)" (Rignall 440). One wonders whether Eliot actually saw Hale's letter or Lewes's dismissive reply.

It is certainly possible to read Lewes's interventions as a matter of assistance and acts of devotion, which is how all of her biographers have viewed it. The problem with this interpretation is that if Eliot did regard Lewes's management as intrusive and controlling, there is no way to know; Eliot would not have been able to converse about any of it in her letters without causing a painful confrontation with Lewes, who may have truly believed he was doing it all for her. Linton's previously noted assessment of Lewes's sincerity and devotion is convincing; however, Eliot's feelings about Lewes's overprotectiveness are more difficult to assess. Because there is evidence that Lewes monitored at least some of Eliot's in-person conversations, incoming mail, and even her outgoing mail, then she had very little privacy, whether or not she agreed to this condition.³⁰ The "performative" nature of her letter writing demonstrated by biographer Rosemarie Bodenheimer takes on an additional layer of self-cloaking if, in addition to the letter's recipient, Lewes was a constant audience. Nevertheless, one must bear in mind that behavior considered abusive in one relationship may be a sign of love in another.

In *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, Bodenheimer demonstrates that Eliot's letters constitute a carefully constructed version of an ideal self. By closely examining the defensive rhetorical strategies evident in her supposedly private letters, Bodenheimer proves Eliot's "particularly intense consciousness of audience" and her preoccupation with "both the act and the idea of performance" for intended but also potential future audiences (xiv-xv, 6). Eliot admitted as much, that she "see[s] all documents in the light of things left behind for others, rather than kept for [her]self" (*GEL* 6: 34-35, cited by Bodenheimer 236). Bodenheimer also explains that Eliot culled the letters she left behind as thoroughly as possible, with a view to posterity.

To Sara Hennell, for example, Eliot confessed, “I have destroyed almost all my friends’ letters to me because they were intended for my eyes and could only fall into the hands of persons who knew little of the writers, if I allowed them to remain till after my death. In proportion as I love every form of piety—which is venerating love—I hate hard curiosity; and unhappily my experience has impressed me with the sense that hard curiosity is the more common temper of mind” (*GEL* 3: 376, cited by Bodenheimer 236). Bodenheimer concludes that Eliot’s “willingness to leave her letters behind for others was secured by her knowledge of how artful they had—almost—always been” (236). To extend Bodenheimer’s theory, Eliot rarely complained about Lewes or anyone else because she firmly believed that stoicism and self-sacrifice in pursuit of harmonious human relationships was heroic.

Hosting sunday afternoons

Romola may not have been a great success, but in 1863, its proceeds enabled Eliot and Lewes to purchase a new London home called “the Priory,” which marked their move into the world of wealth and luxury. Before they moved in, the couple arranged for Owen Jones, Lewes’s famous interior designer friend, to remodel and extravagantly decorate it with all new furniture, carpets, and draperies. By 1865, they had established a weekly social event, known as “Sunday afternoons at the Priory,” which, over a period of more than ten years, helped to promote and enshrine the celebrity status of George Eliot. These literary salons were important publicity-generating events that helped sell her books and consequently enabled the couple to continue in the lavish lifestyle to which they had become accustomed. According to Kathleen McCormack, who has completed the most comprehensive study of this mature period in the Eliot–Lewes relationship, the weekly receptions functioned primarily as publicity junkets:

Lewes shamelessly made the Priory an arena for publicizing George Eliot’s writing, first with *The Spanish Gypsy*, then more aggressively with *Middlemarch*, sustaining interest by circulating word of mouth, seducing likely positive reviewers, and initiating read-aloud sessions by George Eliot herself. Lewes and his efforts offer one explanation for the grueling schedule of salons because, for all their talk about the joys of seeing guests in the most efficient and pleasant way they could contrive, Sundays at the Priory were hard work for both of the busy, sickly hosts. (McCormack, *George Eliot in Society* 28)

The passage above is quoted at length because it provides a careful consideration of the liabilities and benefits of the event for Eliot's career, and because it highlights Lewes's intense involvement in marketing Eliot's books.

The next point to notice is that while the consensus of those who attended the salons was that Lewes relished them, there is considerable evidence that Eliot did not. McCormack sums up the couple's typical position in the room, which illustrates Lewes's gregarious nature and Eliot's more reserved deportment: "All of the guests agree with versions of well-attended afternoons that place George Eliot next to the fire speaking to callers one by one while Lewes gyrated about the edges keeping things going with the group in general" (McCormack, *George Eliot in Society* 10). Regular visitor James Sully contends that, "In the Priory, she was hidden away from public gaze as in a nunnery" (qtd. in Collins 107). The "cell" metaphor was one Eliot used herself, in describing her proscribed life: "We are hermits, and rarely know anything of the world except through the stragglers from the crowd who visit our cell" (*GEL* 6: 207). McCormack takes exception to these comments about the Sunday salons, which so often filled the home with interesting guests and activities (14, 124).³¹ McCormack is right that Sully's and Eliot's comments do not accurately describe the Sunday salons, but they do pertain to Eliot's Priory life on most other days of the week, and seem to comment on the rule of not making calls in London. Rather than an accurate description, Eliot's exaggerated metaphor of the hermit's cell and the suggestion that visitors enter but she rarely leaves to visit others hints at her feelings about the salons. That she found the regular entertaining a strain was confirmed by John Cross in his biography: "She was *not* a typical mistress of a salon," he reported, because "she took things too seriously and seldom found the effort of entertaining compensated by the gain" (Eliot, *GEL* 3: 272; emphasis original). Cross specifies that she enjoyed seeing friends who stopped by on Sundays, but that "the gain" was not worth the effort. Cross may be implying that "the gain" was primarily financial. If this is Cross's meaning, then his account of Eliot's negative feelings about the "effort of entertaining" aligns with other indications that Eliot and Lewes had significant differences of opinion on what mattered, especially how much wealth was necessary.

In marked contrast to Eliot, Lewes clearly loved the spotlight and found energy in groups. Observers typically characterize him as animated, enthusiastic (even "obtrusively enthusiastic"), and eager to conduct the ceremony of tea pouring, telling jokes, and directing the conversation (qtd. in Collins 138).³² Even when he was not feeling well, Lewes nearly always insisted that the show go on. He was well known to most of the guests, because the Priory salons were an extension of the parties he attended in the homes of

some of his friends (McCormack, *George Eliot in Society* 20). Those who did not especially like Lewes, such as Eliza Lynn Linton (who characterizes him in her memoir as crude, rude, and immoral), nevertheless had to admit that in company, Lewes was “a patch of intellectual sunshine” (*Literary Life* 26). Linton was one of the guests who noticed the opposite effect the salons had on Eliot, reporting that “she lost every trace of that finer freedom and whole-heartedness which had been so remarkable in the beginning of her connection with Lewes . . . I have never known anyone who seemed to me so purely artificial as George Eliot . . . Not a line of spontaneity was left in her. . . . She was always the goddess on her pedestal . . . She was so consciously ‘George Eliot’” (*Literary Life* 98–99). Linton is among the few Priory visitors who knew Eliot long before she became Lewes’s partner, and though she was critical of both Eliot and Lewes, she also reflected on their strengths. What she noticed about Eliot’s lack of spontaneity and her intense self-consciousness among the admirers is a sentiment others noted as well.

Nearly echoing Linton’s impressions of the couple’s differences, Mathilde Blind, another contemporary who wrote Eliot’s first biography, recalled Lewes as the “social cement of the gatherings,” as opposed to Eliot, to whom the gatherings “became something of a tax to one who preferred the intimate converse of a few to that more superficially brilliant talk which a promiscuous gathering brings with it” (134). According to one visitor, Thomas Escott, Lewes ran the show “with an air of worshipping proprietorship,” and as a result, the “etiquette dominating the premises . . . was overpowering severe,” and “more like a religious ceremonial than a social reunion” with “Mr. Lewes play[ing] to perfection the part of Hierophant.” Escott added that only the select were “permitted by her possessor” to hold personal converse with her (qtd. in Collins 117–18). Sir Frederick Pollock also commented on Lewes’s strangely controlling one-at-a-time rule (qtd. in Collins 92). Lewes would present callers one by one to Eliot with exceptional deference, as if she was a sibyl, and often called her “Madonna” or “Madame” in the presence of company. According to Sidney Colvin, a regular visitor, if Lewes believed anyone was “absorbing her attention for very long,” he would “cut into the talk” and carry him off, so that another could speak to her (qtd. in Collins 91). Many guests echoed Collins’s observation that “adoration, homage, was what [Lewes] seemed to expect for her from all who came about them” (qtd. in Collins 91). Lewes also “fostered idolators” by encouraging worshipful young admirers of Eliot’s fiction to attend the Sunday afternoons (Bodenheimer, *Real Life* 242).

Despite Cross’s conclusions and the recollections of guests who perceived her to be uncomfortable or overwheeled, there is also evidence of Eliot’s enjoyment of these receptions, which should be noted. While she

was clearly more comfortable sitting with individuals one at a time instead of milling about, numerous recollections, including Cross's, recall the pleasure she took in the one-on-one conversations as visitors were escorted to her chair, and the sincerity of her smile of recognition when someone she knew entered the room. These recollections of the Sunday afternoon soirées serve to demonstrate that in these social situations, Lewes's and Eliot's temperaments contrasted starkly, with Eliot preferring small, intimate groups or one-on-one interactions, and Lewes brought to life as the host of large parties, where he could show off his brilliant partner. A younger friend, Georgiana Burne-Jones, recalled "the weariness [Eliot] expressed of the way in which wisdom was attributed to her. 'I am so tired of being set on a pedestal and expected to vent wisdom—I am only a poor woman' was the meaning of what she said if not the exact phrase, as I think it was" (Eliot, *GEL* 7: 264n6). The large-gathering format and the "attitude of adoration" and "atmosphere almost of awe" Lewes encouraged was disconcerting to some, including Alfred Austin, who added, "I do not say the fault lay with her. I am pretty sure the blame lay with others" (qtd. in Collins 112). The fault—or the credit, depending on one's perspective—clearly belonged to Lewes.

Eliot apparently agreed that Lewes's strategy for generating positive reviews and young disciples to publicize her books was essentially the right one, even when she would instinctively "shrink from" following his counsel. For example, failing to speak enough on a subject Lewes thought was important, Eliot follows up with the visitor in a letter with a revealing explanation: "Mr Lewes tells me that I shrink from a duty in being unwilling to talk to you on the subject you mention [*The Spanish Gypsy*], so I am compunctious" (*GEL* 5: 12). Even if she was half-joking, Eliot's letter implies that Lewes was monitoring and directing her responses, and that she thought it was her "duty" to follow his lead. That the marriage was long lasting and produced a successful career does not mean it was not also strained and difficult at times, as all long marriages are. No union is perfect, not even Eliot's and Lewes's.

Coping without Lewes

When Lewes passed away from enteritis in 1878, Eliot was understandably distraught. Everything she had been and done for more than two decades of her life was bound up with him. But she was certainly not helpless. In fact, Eliot demonstrated excellent business management skills: first, she

negotiated with reviewers to write laudatory obituary articles about Lewes; next, she set up a scholarship in his name at Cambridge University. She spent most of her time and energy during the first months of her mourning period completing and publishing the final two volumes of Lewes's unfinished magnum opus, *Problems of Life and Mind*. Another difficulty she overcame, as previously discussed, was gaining access to the money she had earned because the bank account, property, and investments all were in Lewes's name (Eliot, *Journals* 150). The records of Eliot's and Lewes's respective earnings that she itemized in her journal, as Harris and Johnston have argued, challenge biographical depictions of her dependence on Lewes, and demonstrate instead "her competence in practical matters of finance and business after Lewes's death" (xix). The nine pages of calculations are mentioned—but not reproduced—in the published journals, an omission that, according to Nancy Henry, has the effect of obscuring Eliot's self-sufficiency in managing her investments and other business affairs after Lewes passed away.³³ The missing pages of calculations are necessary to "show, among other things, her determination to manage her grief by taking on her own business affairs" (Henry, *British Empire* 93). Eliot's competence, independence, and willingness to make risky choices both before and after she lived with Lewes indicate that she ceded control of all business affairs to him not because she had no aptitude for or interest in this work, but because this was the arrangement that, implicitly or explicitly, she agreed to. Their practice may be seen as a convenience both desired, but it also could signal an imbalance of power in the relationship.

There are indications of strain in the marriage that require further investigation. One cannot ignore the surprising fact that Eliot was writing love letters to John Cross less than a year after Lewes died that clearly praise Cross's capacities in comparison to Lewes's: "Thou dost not know anything of verbs in Hiphil and Hophal or the history of metaphysics or the position of Kepler in science, but thou knowest best things of another sort, such as belong to the manly heart—secrets of lovingness and rectitude" (*GEL* 7: 212). Eliot's hasty marriage to Cross only a few months later surprised almost everyone who knew her. In light of these highly significant secrets, rumors that circulated about problems during the Eliot-Lewes marriage also deserve more critical inquiry. For example, Eliot's and Lewes's biographers have neglected the following comment of Frederic Harrison, who had been a good friend of the couple since 1860³⁴:

"If I ever wrote a life," he declared, "it would be to say a few words of poor dear old Lewes, in some ways the finest mind,

and the best heart of the lot, poor dear old boy how ill he has been used by men not fit to black his boots and by that epicene woman whom he so loved and who got to loathe the very memory of him." (qtd. in Vogeler 294)

According to Harrison's biographer, his idea that Eliot [Lewes's so-called "epicene woman"] came to hate Lewes may pertain to the rumor that she discovered evidence of Lewes's infidelity to her among his papers after he died.³⁵ As his affectionate letter of congratulations to Cross on his marriage to Eliot attests, Harrison and Cross were very close (Eliot, *GEL* 7: 271–72). Harrison's conclusions that Eliot later "got to loathe the very memory of [Lewes]" is certainly enigmatic.

Another critically neglected (but also potentially significant) assessment of the Eliot–Lewes relationship was made by Eliot's very close friend, Sara Hennell, to Moncure Daniel Conway:

"We all regarded this union as a calamity," said Sara Hennell. "Mr Bray regarded it as due to her defective self-esteem and self-reliance, and her sufferings from loneliness. She continued to suffer from loneliness, but came to love the characters in her books as if they were her children." (qtd. in Collins 58)

The idea that Eliot "continued to suffer from loneliness" during her life with Lewes, which could aptly sum up Dorothea's experience of marriage to Casaubon, is curiously not elaborated. Charles and Cara Bray, and Cara's sister Sara all disliked Lewes, and though their visits were mostly curtailed after Eliot and Lewes began living together, the old friends remained as close as they could through letters that Lewes might (and did) intercept.³⁶ These two surprising assessments of the Eliot–Lewes relationship by Sara Hennell and Frederic Harrison—two people who knew the couple well—are not representative, but they do help support the contention of this article that there were and continue to be problems with the monolithic view that this marriage was ideal.

This study has demonstrated that there were evident difficulties in the Eliot–Lewes partnership, as one would expect in any long marriage, that have been disregarded by biographers. Naturally, Lewes and Eliot would have preferred hagiography, but as Eliot herself teaches, portraits of "real," erring human beings who struggle to find a way to coexist offer important lessons in empathy. Foundational to this study has been Bodenheimer's groundbreaking work on Eliot's letters, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*.

Rather than accepting letters as “truth” and fiction as “untruth,” Bodenheimer reminds readers that “[l]etters and novels are both acts of self-representation in writing and, as such, may both be taken, to begin with, as fictions” (5). If Eliot projected “cover stories” in her letters that represented her best self, in order to win the approval not only of her correspondents but also Lewes, then we cannot take her letters as the final word. We must also consider the possibility that she may have been using her fiction to safely vent her frustrations and complaints about some of her partner’s controlling behavior—a safe space where her feelings could be explored without breach of privacy. Lewes never seems to have been aware of giving offense (not only to his partner, but to anyone). He seems blithely unaware that anyone might view his behavior as anything other than loving and protective. Even though the theme of silently suffering spouses or the avoidance of abusive marriages was a mainstay throughout her fiction-writing career, it is also possible to conclude that any irritation Eliot may have felt toward Lewes was actively repressed, so that he never noticed.

In the first chapter of Eliot’s *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, the narrator attempts to guide the reader’s interpretation of his autobiographical writing with a statement concerning his intent: “I am not indeed writing an autobiography, or pretending to give an unreserved description of myself, but only offering some slight confessions in an apologetic light.” He fears he will betray himself, the same way “half our impressions of [Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s] character come not from what he means to convey, but from what he unconsciously enables us to discern . . . I too may be so far like Jean Jacques as to communicate more than I am aware of” (*TS* 6–7). He states he is fearful of revealing too much, yet at the same time the narrator deliberately draws attention to the idea that he may be communicating more than he “means to convey.” The hint—that we must seek out hidden or implied meanings to discover what has been unintentionally or subversively communicated—can be applied to the search for correspondences between Eliot’s fiction and her life. This reconsideration of the “protectiveness” and “encouragement” Lewes provided throughout Eliot’s career not only complicates the “perfect union” myth, but also, potentially, opens up her fiction—with its fascinating links to her biography—to productive new interpretations.

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Notes

1. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will refer to this article's subject as George Eliot rather than Marian Lewes or any of the other names she called herself even when I am discussing her life prior to 1857, the year her pseudonym first came into existence.
2. The "strong-minded woman" epithet comes from Thomas Carlyle, who scrawled "Lewes and strong-minded woman" on the envelope of Lewes's letter to him explaining their decision to travel to Germany together (Eliot, *GEL* 2: 176n1).
3. This assessment belongs to Charles Bray, who conducted a quasi-scientific phrenological reading of Eliot's temperament according to the bumps on her head. Gordon Haight tacitly endorses this view by using it as a subtitle in his biography (530).
4. For example, Annie Fields and Maria Theresa Earle separately report that Lewes showed them the leather-bound manuscripts of Eliot's novels when they visited the Priory; Fields specifies that Lewes showed her "the volumes containing the touching dedications to himself" (qtd. in Collins 99, 223). Because these guests were not intimates of Eliot or Lewes, it appears that the manuscripts with their seemingly private dedications were part of the home tour for guests.
5. This article is a highly condensed portion of a book-length project that also includes an analysis of the correspondences between Lewes and Eliot's marriage and Eliot's fictional spouses. This article focuses only on the biography, so that Eliot's responses in her letters and journals to what may be interpreted as Lewes's controlling behavior are not confused with her heroines' responses to their spouses coercive control.
6. Several reprints of "How I Came to Write Fiction" are readily available, including Eliot, *GEL* 2: 406–10; Haight 206–07; and Eliot, *Journals* 289–91.
7. Summarizing several sources, Haight reports, "Sometimes at Richmond, they had not even enough food." Regarding those days, Lewes wrote, "we were very poor, living in one room, where I had my little table with my microscope making my observations, and my wife another close at hand where she wrote; we were trying to pay off debts" (qtd. in Haight 218). Though Eliot mentions money infrequently in her letters, that summer in a letter to the Brays from Tenby, where the couple was staying to conduct research for Lewes's "Sea-side Studies" articles, she half-jokes that she has become a "miser" and insists that they "could not afford a sixpenny walk very frequently" (*GEL* 2: 233).
8. Jowett recalls Lewes's story as: "One day he said to her ('We were very poor at the time') my dear try and write a novel. So she produced the first pages of Amos Barton. He said this is well, but there is nothing dramatic in <all this> what you have written: she added a dramatic sketch 'Good'—now try the pathetic'—She did so & introduced the death of Millie. Thus the question of her power to write a novel was solved" (qtd. in Collins 51).
9. The full passage from Margaret Holland's account of Lewes's story reads: "Our friends—Herbert Spencer—and others used to say to me—Why doesn't she write a novel? and I used to reply that she was without the creative power. At last—we were very badly off—I was writing for Blackwood—I said to her 'My dear—try your hand at something. Do not attempt a novel—but try a story. We may get 20 guineas for it from Blackwood and that will be something'" (qtd. in Collins 51).
10. Lewes told Charles Eliot Norton that they "were very poor, (living at Wimbledon in one room . . .), we were trying to pay off debts; and were so poor, that I remember well as we crossed the Common one morning saying to her 'You and I ought to

live better than we do, we'll begin to have beer for lunch.' A little after this, I said to her, 'suppose you should try and write a story,' and sometime days later she showed me the first pages of 'Amos Barton'" (qtd. in Collins 50).

11. For example, *Silas Marner* and "Brother Jacob" are fable-like stories that warn of the corrupting influence of a greedy desire for money. Eppie, Esther, and Dorothea (in *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt*, and *Middlemarch*, respectively) reject wealthy inheritances for true love and lives of comparative poverty—choices intended to be read as noble and heroic.
12. "[Gwendolen] had been brought to accept [Grandcourt] in spite of everything—brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while . . . In any case, she would have to submit; and he enjoyed thinking of her as his future wife, whose pride and spirit were suited to command every one but himself. He had no taste for a woman who was all tenderness to him, full of petitioning solicitude and willing obedience. He meant to be master of a woman who would have liked to master him, and who perhaps would have been capable of mastering another man" (Eliot, *DD* 2: 64).
13. As Eliot told Bessie Parkes, "It is Mr. Lewes's wish that the few friends that care about me should recognize me as Mrs. Lewes" (*GEL* 2: 384). It is less clear whether using a pen name also originated with "Mr. Lewes's wish." Bodenheimer and Henry have commented on the multiple identities Eliot adopted. See Bodenheimer's "A Woman of Many Names" in *The Cambridge Companion* and "The Outing of George Eliot" in *Real Life*. See also Henry's fresh insights into the triangulated relationship of Eliot, Lewes, and Agnes Jervis (*Life* 99–101).
14. In defense of her relationship with Lewes, Eliot wrote to Cara Bray in September 1855: "Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done—they obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner" (*GEL* 2: 214). The statement, first quoted by John Cross, appears in nearly all biographical summaries of George Eliot.
15. Though her friends Bessie Parkes and Barbara Leigh Smith (later Bodichon) visited her, and she made a new friend of her seventeen-years-younger neighbor Maria Congreve in 1859, it was five years before Eliot was able to see her former three best friends, Sara Hennell, Cara Bray, and Charles Bray. "Marian and her dear trio were together again after five years of alienation" (Haight 287–88).
16. Eliot lets slip another rare complaint regarding this period of incognito—that while writing alongside Lewes in their cramped quarters, the scratching of his pen would "drive her nearly wild" (Haight 192).
17. Emily Davies records a conversation she had with Eliot and Lewes on the subject of truthfulness that demonstrates how far their views differed. Davies writes that Eliot "spoke of truthfulness as *the* most important thing to teach . . . She would not admit the difficulty of deciding when truth ought to be spoken and when not. I instanced keeping secret the authorship of a book. She thought that might be done by refusing to answer questions, but Mr Lewes agreed with me that often that is as good as telling, and maintained that denial in such a case was not lying. He said he had himself said No, flatly, when he had been asked about the authorship of her books. She said that she did not know that he had, and did not support his view. She thought pains should be taken to avoid situations in which truth cannot be told, so as to keep up the habit of truthfulness" (qtd. in Collins 65).
18. In comparison to Eliot's poor relatives, including her beloved sister Chrissey's children and friends, who were occasionally sent sums smaller than £50, Lewes's

family members were far more generously provided for. Not only were Lewes's wife, mother, and sister-in-law given regular allowances and his children (including Edmund, Rose, Ethel, and Mildred in addition to "his" three boys, Charles, Thornton, and Herbert) given occasional large gifts of money, but also Lewes's nephew Vivian was gifted a whopping £1,800 in stocks and shares, "probably as a twenty-first birthday present" (Ashton, *GHL* 261; Haight 460–61). The Leweses paid £2,000 for the Priory, their most extravagant home (Haight 371), which helps put this birthday gift into perspective. Whether Eliot knew about such gifts is not indicated, but because the accounts were in his own name, Lewes would not have needed her permission to distribute funds or stocks.

19. For further information regarding Lewes's and Eliot's travels, please see Kathleen McCormack's *George Eliot's English Travels*.
20. Critics agree that *The Mill on the Floss* and the "Brother and Sister" sonnet series are autobiographical representations that reflect Eliot's fond recollections of her childhood with Isaac and indicate her longing for reconnection with him.
21. Eliot's half-sister Fanny Houghton remarked, "The publication of *GHL*'s will 'in which he leaves *all* his property to Marian Evans (*one* thousand pounds) positively disturbed my peace.' . . . I could not sleep for thinking of it—for, of course, she was the source of the household expenses . . . his poor legacy was a farce; besides, her name ought not to have been mentioned. The sons should have been made executors" (Haight 523n1; emphasis original).
22. Eliot also expresses her idea of what constitutes enough money in a letter to Sara Hennell in 1859, in which she comments that their new home of Holly Lodge "is very comfortable—with far more of vulgar indulgences in it than I ever expected to have again." She hopes to have one day a simple life in the country with "a small independence to save us from writing drivel for dishonest money" (*GEL* 3: 14–15). Henry convincingly explains that "Eliot's puritanical belief in renunciation of wealth never left her" whereas "Lewes was not burdened with this Calvinist impulse to scourge and renounce . . . His guiltless negotiation of business deals for her writing released her from the painful conflicts she suffered over being rich, even though that guilt is reflected in her fiction" (*Life* 135).
23. Lewes writes, "Unhappily the habitual tone of her mind is distrust of herself, and no sympathy, no praise, can do more than lift her out of it for a day or two; but by repetition the curing influences tell, for they become massed, and as *we psychologists* say they enable her to apperceive the fact that her books are something more than mere amusements" (Eliot, *GEL* 5: 228; emphasis added).
24. Eliot does not comment on Lewes's motives for taking away her play. Haight summarizes the circumstances: "Though George did all he could to give her assurance, praising her verse as 'triumphantly successful,' her headaches and feebleness of mind and body defeated his best efforts. He had always mistrusted her dramatic powers, and he had to confess that the play was flat and monotonous. On 21 February 1865, Marian wrote, 'George has taken my drama away from me'" (379). Lewes's act may be interpreted as helpful or controlling.
25. Eliot was conscious that some of her physical complaints and "troubles were purely psychical," related to "self-dissatisfaction and despair of achieving anything worth the doing" (*GEL* 2: 155–56).
26. The relationship between Eliza Lynn Linton and George Eliot is complicated by the fact that since their close friendship fell apart in the 1840s, Linton strongly disliked Lewes. Linton was incensed that Lewes blamed his friend Thornton Hunt for ruining his marriage with Agnes, arguing that of the two, Lewes was by far the

- more immoral free-lover (see *My Literary Life* 11–40). A fellow author who had boarded with Chapman and knew Eliot from her *Westminster Review* days, Linton also visited the couple several times over a fifteen-year period, up to 1869, her last recorded visit to the Priory. Critic Elaine Showalter concludes both Oliphant and Linton “never faltered in their praise of her books, but they felt excluded from, and envious of, her world. Her very superiority depressed them” (107).
27. Redinger is typical of biographers who have recognized Lewes’s opening of Eliot’s mail as helpful and protective. In reference to Sara Hennell’s letter criticizing parts of *Romola*, Redinger comments: “It was letters such as this one from Sara which made Lewes rush to get the mail first and answer them himself” (451). In her comment about Lewes’s continued protection into the 1870s, Ashton acknowledges that Eliot “still had her mail and the critical reviews of her works censored for her by Lewes, [but] she now sometimes dined out and went to public places more than she had done in the early years of her life with Lewes” (*GHL* 252). Surprisingly, biographers have not previously connected Eliot’s reserve in her letters with the recognized fact that Lewes was reading them.
 28. For an analysis of Lewes’s relative success as a scientist, see Beverley Park Rilett’s “George Henry Lewes, the Real Man of Science behind Eliot’s Fictional Pedants.”
 29. Edith Simcox, who wanted to be Eliot’s first biographer, viewed Lewes’s taking over Eliot’s correspondence as enormously helpful, though the letters’ recipients were decidedly “not grateful.” Fully endorsing Lewes’s assistance, Simcox reported that he: “watched over her own life; he stood between her and the world, he relieved her from all those minor cares which chafe and fret the artist’s soul; he wrote her letters (a proceeding for which he would say laughingly her correspondents were not grateful); in a word, he so smoothed the course of her outer life as to leave all her powers free to do what she alone could do for the world and for the many who looked to her for help and guidance. No doubt this devotion brought its own reward, but . . . great as his reward was, it was no greater than was merited by the most faithful perfect love that ever crowned a woman’s life” (51).
 30. Though the Victorians often passed along their letters to be read by others secondarily, it was against the law and against the conventions of middle-class propriety to open mail addressed to another person. Chapter 63 of *Middlemarch* may contain a clue to Eliot’s feelings about having her mail intercepted by Lewes. Rosamond has been awaiting a reply from Lydgate’s wealthy uncle Godwin, to whom she has written for financial assistance. Though she is desperate to know Godwin’s answer, Rosamond will not open the letter because it is addressed to her husband. It simply would have been wrong.
 31. In *George Eliot in Society*, McCormack demonstrates that the salons were not always solemn occasions. Lewes was a lively host; furthermore, some events included musical entertainment.
 32. The “obtrusively enthusiastic” comment is quoted by K. K. Collins from the diary of Mary Gladstone Drew (138). Similarly, Sedley Taylor found Lewes “repulsive” and “inordinately conceited, always talk[ing] about what we are doing, call[ing] Mrs. Lewes ‘Madame’ (qtd. in Collins 171, emphasis original). Disparaging recollections about Lewes are not common—many delighted in Lewes’s company—but they appear enough to be unsurprising.
 33. Twenty-six pages of calculations, including Eliot’s and Lewes’s receipts, are published in Volume 7 of *The George Eliot Letters*.
 34. Harrison recalls the closeness of his friendship with Eliot and Lewes in his “Reminiscences of George Eliot” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* 103 (1901). Harrison asserts

that for twenty-one years he “constantly saw her, had much conversation with her,” and that they exchanged many letters (577). Harrison was a mourner at Eliot's funeral.

35. Lord Acton, who helped John Cross prepare his wife's posthumous biography along with Herbert Spencer and Isaac Evans, wrote appreciatively that Cross, “loyal to the memory of Lewes, does not hint . . . that she ever awoke to the fact that she had sacrificed herself to an illusion”; Acton adds that for himself, he “will not supply conjectures” (qtd. in Haight 393). Haight comments directly on these “conjectures”: “Malicious stories about their relations were already circulating in 1867, spread by envious gossips, most of whom had never been inside the Priory. There is no evidence whatever that Marian repented of her decision to live with George or that he was ever unfaithful in his love for her” (393). Ashton affirms Haight's conclusion, but neither offers additional information about the sources of such rumors. Clearly, further research is necessary.
36. Although Sara Hennell did not often visit George Eliot after the latter began living with Lewes, the friends kept in touch constantly through letters. Haight's collection includes more than three hundred letters written from Eliot to Hennell, with more than half written after 1861. There was not a single year when they did not exchange letters, and one of the last letters Eliot ever wrote was to Sara, her lifelong friend.

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