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## Review of George Eliot

Kristin Brady

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## A.G. van den Broek

### *George Eliot* by Kristin Brady (Macmillan Women Writers, Macmillan, 1992)

The general editors of this series, Eva Figes and Adele King, explain that there is a need for their series of feminist readings because much of the criticism on selected women writers by male critics is usually unfair, false or simplistic (vii). Kristin Brady very quickly and effectively proves their point in the first chapter of *George Eliot* by referring to many influential nineteenth- and twentieth-century male critics who were often more preoccupied with Eliot's appearance or what they judged to be her suspect femininity than with a straightforward consideration of her artistic achievements. Among such critics, says Brady, Gordon S. Haight was a prominent, albeit unwitting, offender.

Brady rounds on Haight for his persistent use of two phrases, 'some one to lean on' and '[she] was not fitted to stand alone', which crop up throughout his biographical writing on Eliot. But, Brady reminds us, these phrases are lifted from Charles Bray's 'phrenological reading of Eliot's skull' (16 ff) and are, therefore, anything but reasonable assessments of Eliot's character. Haight was not the first to cite Bray's 'diagnosis', but his tremendous influence as an Eliot scholar has meant that these particular male assumptions about a woman and her supposed frailties have been 'transformed into incontrovertible fact' (19). And this now common view that Eliot was a rather weak, potentially hysterical woman, morbidly dependant on men, has naturally affected the way her work has been interpreted.

An altogether different picture of Eliot emerges when Brady recalls the biographical information without the gender definitions provided by Haight, *et al.*, but instead takes into account Eliot's 'position as a feminine gendered subject within patriarchy' (22). In this light, her determination not to accompany her father to church in 1842 and her decision not to marry the unidentified local artist, her eventual rejection of Chapman's sexual advances yet continued commitment to the *Westminster Review*, not to mention her rich and diverse artistic output, all point to an impressive ability to stand perfectly upright and alone.

However, Brady believes that Eliot was never an ideal feminist: she embodied 'contradictory qualities'; she was 'a saboteur of, and a collaborator with, patriarchy...' (58). Despite her independence of mind and spirit, she was always forced to accept the roles and standards imposed on women generally. And this tension between personal aspiration and social acceptance, Brady argues, lies at the heart of her fiction. Eliot's artistic collaboration with patriarchy is seen in the endings of her stories,

which always endorse male superiority; her role as saboteur is felt in the descriptions of female suffering, which inevitably accompany such endings and tend to subvert them. She may not always have been a conscious saboteur, nevertheless, 'the discrepancy between [her] explicit aesthetic program and the emotional effect [that] the text generates' indicates subversion of some sort. *Scenes of Clerical Life*, for instance, contains stories about clerics, but the reader is more struck by the victimization of women than anything else. *Adam Bede* ends happily for the hero, but women are left marginalized, silenced or banished. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the narrator says that Maggie and Tom are united in death, but Maggie's constant denial of self is what the reader remembers. *Silas Marner*, *Romola*, *Felix Holt* and *The Spanish Gypsy* all depict women seeking 'access to the world through men ... [unable to] act without male endorsement and sponsorship' (142). *Middlemarch* examines 'patriarchal power relations and their suppression of feminine desire' (159-60), and *Daniel Deronda* asserts 'phallic privilege' over female desire, making 'women for so many "generations" the "makeshift link" in patriarchal families' (187-89).

Having demonstrated how easy it is to be biased, Brady makes a point of disclaiming objectivity in her own criticism (22). Nevertheless, I think her ideological premises sometimes lead to oversubtle conclusions, like the one, for instance, suggesting that Mrs. Gibbs's cup of tea in 'Amos Barton' enacts 'the imbrication of patriarchal and imperial economics' (62-64). However, the majority of Brady's arguments are very persuasive. Her discussions on Eliot's male narrators, who create subversive subtexts by rejecting male perspectives or omitting significant details about women, are absorbing, and some of the character analyses are also very fine. The 'negation of woman's desire' and the 'privileging by patriarchy of the masculine' (190) are clearly and convincingly illustrated when it is pointed out that women like Mary Garth make choices in life by avoiding 'discontent rather than any achievement of contentment' (172). There is much to learn from *George Eliot*: it surveys all the novels and stories and some of the poetry and often redirects attention to Eliot's art in fresh and stimulating ways.