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## Review of George Eliot and the Conventions of Popular Women's Fiction: A Serious Literary Response to the "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists"

Susan Rowland Tush

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Tush, Susan Rowland, "Review of George Eliot and the Conventions of Popular Women's Fiction: A Serious Literary Response to the "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists"" (1993). *The George Eliot Review*. 216.  
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**Linda K. Roberston**

***George Eliot and the Conventions of Popular Women's Fiction: A Serious Literary Response to the 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists'*  
by Susan Rowland Tush (Peter Lang, 1993)**

As Susan Rowland Tush notes, recent critics have given considerable attention (often rather harshly) to George Eliot's essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', which was published in the *Westminster Review* in October 1856. Among these critics are some who argue that Eliot undermines the position of women by calling a certain class of novels 'silly'. Tush points out, quite rightly, that Eliot does not apply the term casually or universally; she is very specific about the qualities she considers silliness, and she praises Harriet Martineau, Currer Bell, and Mrs. Gaskell in the same essay. Tush reminds her readers, as does Thomas Pinney in *Essays of George Eliot* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), that 'Silly Novels' appeared just before Eliot began writing fiction. Thus, her comments on what constitutes bad fiction are particularly interesting. Eliot directs attention to three categories of novels and uses six examples published in 1856 to support her case.

Tush uses details from the novels to demonstrate the strength of Eliot's argument and to compare them with Eliot's own development of plot and treatment of character in her fiction. Tush devotes a chapter to *Adam Bede* as a contrast to Eliot's category of 'white neck-cloth' Evangelical novels typified by *The Old Gray Church* and *Adonijah: A Tale of the Jewish Dispersion*; a chapter to *The Mill on the Floss* as a contrast to the 'oracular' species of High Church philosophical or theoretical novels typified by *The Enigma: A Leaf from the Archives of Wolchorley House*,<sup>1</sup> and a chapter to *Middlemarch* as a contrast to Eliot's 'mind-and-millinery' species typified by *Compensation: A Story of Real Life Thirty Years Ago*; *Laura Gay*; and *Rank and Beauty, or the Young Baroness*. She carefully points out that Eliot never intended only these six works to be branded as 'silly novels' but that they are representatives of types.

Although there is no index and the notes are inconveniently located at the end of each chapter, this brief (178 page) book is very readable. Unlike many books which appear a year or two after the author's doctoral dissertation on the same topic, this volume (which emerged from Tush's 1991 dissertation at Emory University) is not laden with literary jargon or trendy interpretations. The comments on Eliot's own novels will probably offer nothing new to serious readers of Eliot, but the examples from and the comparisons with the other novels are interesting. Susan Rowland Tush has performed a useful service by reminding the modern reader of some of the now-obscure novels of 1856 and by showing how Eliot employs parody, reverses expectations, and uses other techniques to strengthen the role of women in her novels and to overthrow the conventions of popular women's fiction.

**Note**

- 1 Pinney states, 'The title according to the *English Catalogue* is *The Enigma: A Leaf from the Archives of Wolchorley House*, 1856.' It appears as *The Enigma: A Leaf from the Chronicles of the Wolchorley House* in the *Westminster Review*.