

2005

Aesop's Fables and George Eliot's Brother and Sisters Sonnets

Margaret Wolfit

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

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

Wolfit, Margaret, "Aesop's Fables and George Eliot's Brother and Sisters Sonnets" (2005). *The George Eliot Review*. 511.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/511>

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

AESOP'S *FABLES* AND GEORGE ELIOT'S BROTHER AND SISTER SONNETS

By Margaret Wolfit

It is always exciting to discover something new and to come upon it unexpectedly. That was my happy experience a few years ago. I had decided to try my hand at devising a biographical programme on George Eliot and to attempt to portray her at the end of her life, reminiscing on past events. I wanted to absorb as much as I could about her, starting with her early days. What were the influences that shaped her life and writing? What books had she read as a child?

She tells us: 'I could not be satisfied with the things around me. I was constantly living in a world of my own creation, and was quite content to have no companions that I might be left to my own musings and imagine scenes in which I was chief actress; conceive what a character novels would give to these Utopias. I was early supplied with them by those who kindly sought to gratify my appetite for reading and of course I made use of the materials they supplied for building my castles in the air, although I was slow to read because I enjoyed playing more.'

It seems as though it was not until her brother Isaac, whom she adored, was given a pony and cared less and less to play with his young sister, that she turned to reading for consolation. 'Books became a passion with me, I read everything I could lay hands on. [...] I found passionate delight and total absorption in Aesop's *Fables* which opened up a new world to my imagination. It was given to me by an old friend of the family, an elderly gentleman, who came to visit and brought me a book from time to time. I was very grateful as we did not have many books at home: the Bible, Shakespeare, Pilgrim's Progress and Joe Miller's Jest book being among the few.'

The Bible 'Yes'! Shakespeare 'Yes'! They had obviously been a great influence on her, but what of Aesop's *Fables* in which she had found passionate delight? I found a copy and began to read it avidly looking for clues, and then I came upon it: 'Brother and Sister'. I started to read.

A certain man had two children, a boy and a girl, and the boy was as good looking as the girl was plain. One day as they were playing in their Mother's chamber they chanced upon a mirror and saw their own features for the first time. The boy saw what a handsome fellow he was and began to boast to his sister about his good looks; she, on her part, was ready to cry with vexation when she was aware of her own plainness and took his remarks as an insult to herself. Running to her father, she told him of her brother's conceit and accused him of meddling with his mother's things. Her Father laughed and kissed them both and said: 'My children, learn now to make a good use of the glass. You, my boy, strive to be as good as it shows you to be handsome; and you, my girl, resolve to make up for the plainness of your features by the sweetness of your disposition [...]'.

When I had finished reading it, I read it through again. I couldn't quite believe it. It seemed incredible. Maggie and Tom in '*The Mill on the Floss*' in the haircutting scene in their Mother's

chamber, where Tom says: 'What a queer thing you look, look at yourself in the glass, you look like the idiot we throw our nutshells to at school', is strangely reminiscent of Aesop when he says: 'resolve to make up for the plainness of your features by the sweetness of your disposition.' She *must* have read it.

I was bursting to tell someone of my find. I needed some authentication. The authority on George Eliot, Gordon Haight, was in London at the time. He had been very supportive to me over my programme of '*The Mill on the Floss*', so I telephoned to ask him if he would read my script as far as it went and he agreed. I included the Aesop fable. I waited anxiously to hear his reaction. I didn't have long to wait. He phoned to say that he thought it was most unlikely that she had read the 'Brother and Sister' Fable. Yet he had obviously been intrigued, because a few days later he rang again to say that he had been to the reading room at the British Museum, and 'Yes' she could have read that edition! I thanked him. My gut reaction had been right. It was a wonderful feeling. So much seemed to fall into place; so much to stem from that fable: the creation of Tom and Maggie, George Eliot's own insecurities as to her looks, and finally the 'Brother and Sister' sonnets.

I cannot choose but think upon the time
When out two lives grew like two buds that kiss
At lightest thrill from the bees swinging chime
Because the one so near the other is.

I knelt with him at marbles, marked his fling,
Cut the ringed stem that made the apple drop
Or watched him winding close the spiral string
That looped the orbit of the humming top.

Those long days, measured by my little feet,
Had chronicles that yield me many a text [...].