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Review of George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism

Judith Johnston

*George Eliot and the Discourses of Medievalism* argues that Eliot abandons realism in her last two novels in favour of medievalism, and that recognizing the presence and function of medieval discourses in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* enables subversive political readings. Johnston positions these readings against criticism of the novels that identifies a collapse of narrative coherence and characterization in Eliot’s ‘failure’ to sustain their apparent realism. In contrast, Johnston proposes that Eliot’s manipulation of medievalism signals neither the failure of realism nor realism’s antithesis. Johnston argues that the discourses of medievalism that Eliot manipulates share a facility for transformation: hagiography (saints’ lives), allegory and romance are ‘flexible, capable of changing shape, of shifting from a type of realism, into fantasy, and sometimes back again’ (26). Eliot uses these archaic forms to confront contemporary issues and enable a ‘shifting political perspective that can accommodate the unlikely and the unexpected’, to craft a novel of reform (*Middlemarch*) and a novel of regeneration (*Daniel Deronda*) (17). Johnston demonstrates convincingly that Eliot’s version of medievalism recalls an age in transition, and that she returns to medieval structures in order to depict improbable and unlikely transformations in the Victorian age, another period of rapid change.

Johnston’s reading of *Middlemarch* aims to defend Dorothea Brooke’s centrality through examination of Dorothea, Ladislaw and Lydgate via the interpretative model offered by medieval discourses. Dorothea’s life is considered in relation to the lives of female saints, Lydgate is a failed hero in the tradition of romance, and Ladislaw is patterned on the Dreamer figure of allegory. Johnston’s discussion of Eliot’s research into hagiographies of female saints is fascinating, demonstrating how Eliot drew on Anna Jameson’s commentaries on St Theresa as an active reformer in the characterization of Dorothea. Johnston also investigates Eliot’s references to the saints Barbara, Clara, Dorothea and Catherine, tracing Dorothea’s progress from passive immurement to escape via these saints’ lives. She argues that Dorothea’s characterization through medieval hagiography is a submerged metaphor for her suppression, and that when she discards restraint after Casaubon’s death hagiography is supplanted by a secular narrative. The saints cease to be invoked and Dorothea walks away from the tomb, thus overturning the hagiographic model in which the tomb marks the end of the saint’s narrative.

Will Ladislaw’s ambiguity has proved troublesome for critics, but Johnston shows that Will’s indeterminacy reflects that of the figure of the medieval Dreamer in search of truth. Johnston argues that Eliot uses medieval allegory, particularly Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, to show Will Ladislaw’s metamorphic condition, and that it is this very indeterminacy, his freedom to choose a vocation, that makes him the natural choice for Dorothea, who becomes his figure of authority. Will is drawn to the more active model of the romantic knight, but Eliot undermines this through the deflating figure of Don Quixote, thereby freeing Will from the chivalric mode and releasing him into the role of the Dreamer. In the space of dream vision, romance structures can be overturned and Will can be transformed, emerging into a realist mode as a partner for Dorothea. Johnston identifies a similar undermining of the heroic model in the representation of Tertius Lydgate. He is introduced as a *bel inconnu*, or ‘fair unknown’, a Walter Scott style of hero who will overcome obstacles and inevitably triumph, but Eliot pits this heroic mode
against exemplum. Like his namesake, the medieval poet John Lydgate, whose genius never quite matched Chaucer’s, Tertius Lydgate fails to match the achievements of his medical heroes. In settling for a career life as a doctor for the wealthy, he falls from fortune to a position equivalent to John Lydgate’s, who relied on patronage. As an exemplum of male vocational failure, Lydgate serves as a counterpoint to the frustration of the woman seeking a vocation, so that his narrative functions in parallel with Dorothea’s.

Johnston identifies an even more comprehensive engagement with medieval discourses in *Daniel Deronda* than in *Middlemarch*, arguing that medieval romance in particular permeates the novel to such a degree that ‘[o]nly *Daniel Deronda*’s contemporary setting is realistic’ (38). Eliot enacts a ‘full-scale appropriation of the medieval’ in order to depict a ‘passage to the future’ (38). Identifying medievalism as a unifying function in the novel allows Johnston to argue against the idea that there is a fissure between the realist and romance elements of the novel. Johnston argues persuasively that *Daniel Deronda* is a novel of chivalry, and that recognizing its archaic structures and reading according to medieval rather than realist logic enables a sympathetic appraisal of the conclusion. She identifies Daniel as a quester figure after the pattern of the round table knights of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, who have to choose between the religious quest for the Sangreal and the secular quest in defence of a lady. Mirah Lapidoth represents Daniel’s religious quest, and Johnston demonstrates how closely Mirah is patterned on the figure of the Arthurian desired female or immured queen, a type endowed with national and political significance. Mirah’s passivity understandably frustrates critics and modern readers, but when she is read in a medieval context as the embodiment of a religious idea her stasis is coherent with her role. In turn, Johnston argues that Daniel’s choice of Mirah over Gwendolen is inevitable rather than inexplicable, given that according to the pattern of the *Morte Darthur* it should be understood as a choice between the synagogue and Gwendolen, and not as Mirah versus Gwendolen. As the desirous rather than desired female of medieval romance, a Guinevere disrupting the religious quest, Gwendolen stands for the secular quest. Johnston shows how Daniel bears a stronger resemblance to Galahad than to Lancelot, and that an alliance between the saintly knight and Guinevere/Gwendolen is impossible. It is Daniel’s saintly quality that critics have found so unpalatable, but Johnston demonstrates that overlap between a hero’s life and a saint’s life was typical of Middle English hagiographies of male saints, and that Eliot consciously adopted this indeterminacy between history and romance in *Daniel Deronda*.

Johnston’s research into Eliot’s scholarship and reading of commentaries on medieval literature and art is impressive, and it is a pleasure to be able to follow Eliot’s own research so closely. Eliot is shown to be a subtle and thorough reader of medieval literature, with an eye for instances of female rebellion in apparently patriarchal texts. Johnston’s argument that Eliot’s wide reading of medieval texts influenced her imagination is persuasive, and ultimately she defends forcefully her identification of ‘unrealism’ in the work the writer who defended realism so strongly in *Adam Bede*.

**Katherine Inglis**  
**Birkbeck, University of London**