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Atkinson, Juliette, "Conference Report- The Mills on the Floss" (2011). *The George Eliot Review*. 600.
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CONFERENCE REPORT *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

By Juliette Atkinson

'*The Mill on the Floss* is everyone's favourite novel' was the provocative declaration that launched the conference, devoted to Eliot's second novel, held at the Institute of English Studies on 6 November 2010. Barbara Hardy's opening statement was given some weight by the day's papers which, in tackling subjects as diverse as translation, inheritance, idleness, and adaptation, repeatedly expressed the speakers' highly personal relationship with the novel.

In the first of two hour-long papers, entitled 'Inheritance and parental investment in *The Mill on the Floss*', David Amigoni (Exeter) offered fresh insights into the intersection of aesthetic and scientific concerns in Eliot's work by demonstrating how Eliot found science of assistance in exploring the range of narratives on parental investment circulating in the 1860s. Amigoni considered how Mr Tulliver seeks to determine the intellectual capital of his children and ensure its transmission, and in doing so drew on David C. Geary's essay 'Evolution of Paternal Investment', which explores how the parental investor weighs the value of educational and reproductive successes. When Mr Tulliver ponders that 'it seems a bit of a pity ... as the lad should take after the mother's side instead of the little wench', Eliot presents demotic speech meeting cutting-edge Victorian science.

Inheritance was also a theme of Kathryn Hughes's (UEA) 'Who were the Dodsons? Uncovering Traces of Family History in *The Mill on the Floss*', which demonstrated how our understanding of Eliot's writing process can be enriched by mining her childhood environment. Hughes vividly and humorously evoked the close-knit community of the Pearson sisters, who, unlike the Dodsons' response to Maggie, appear to have appreciated Mary Ann's talents. Their shared concern with appropriate family conduct is illustrated by the will made by Eliot's aunt Mary, which left Eliot her initialled cutlery, a gesture evoked in Mrs Tulliver's fear of her marked belongings being sold to strangers. Another bequest was considered in the form of a dress donated to the GEF by a descendant of Mrs Johnson (an inspiration for Mrs Pullet). The dress had been worn in a Nuneaton performance of *Adam Bede* in 1890 by 'Mrs Poyser', who left intriguing recollections of how Eliot's childhood community tried to map itself onto the novels.

Adaptation also formed the topic of the first of six shorter papers. Alain Jumeau (Paris-Sorbonne) shared his experiences of translating *The Mill on the Floss* in a Napoleonic hundred days. Having convinced publishers that a new translation was needed (Eliot remains neglected in France), Jumeau was faced with the challenge of conveying the varied intonations of Eliot's characters. Jumeau offered a witty display of the means used to translate Mr Tulliver's language: Tulliver regularly drops syllables, yet reproducing this in French threatened legibility, therefore approximations, more natural to a French ear, were devised. (For example, informality was suggested by abandoning the negative, and the demotic 'y' was preferred over the formal 'il'.) In order to capture such phrases, Jumeau drew on reminiscences of his grandfather's speech, appropriately working in his own autobiographical echoes into what is often deemed Eliot's most autobiographical novel.

The manner in which readers connect with novels was also the subject of Donna Maynard's (Exeter) suggestive presentation, "'She had often wished for Books with more in them": Imagined Space and the Making of "More" in *The Mill on the Floss*', which investigated the processes by which reading absorbs us. Maynard guided the audience through some of the novel's patterns that function as a kind of imaginative recall, including the idea of depth and sinking, from the scene in the Red Deeps to the Tullivers' financial and emotional descent. Maggie famously becomes absorbed in her reading, and Maynard provided new ways of thinking about how the ephemeral nature of reading means that we often take it for granted, and how concepts such as space may help us define it with greater subtlety.

Kyriki Hadjiafxendi (Exeter) followed with a penetrating analysis of 'Maggie Tulliver and the Ethics of Work'. Maggie is one of Eliot's few paid seamstresses, and questions the image of the Victorian woman as domestic and unproductive. Maggie's work brings to light Eliot's ambivalent relationship with the literary marketplace as a site of female productivity and notions of gender solidarity. The paper untangled in particular the chapter 'A Voice from the Past' in which Maggie has set aside her books except the Bible, Thomas à Kempis and the *Christian Year*, which 'filled her mind' as 'she sat with her well-plied needle, making shirts and other complicated stitchings, falsely called "plain"'. Such passages display Maggie attempting to make her sewing purposeful, yet also shows Eliot's reluctance to depict Maggie's shirtmaking with her customary realist detail.

Louise Lee's (KCL) 'Maggie Tulliver and the Ethics of Boredom' took us from work to idleness, and set out to remedy Bertrand Russell's complaint that 'boredom as a factor in human behaviour has received ... far less attention than it deserves'. Lee evocatively brought together Victorian depictions of boredom, ranging from Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House* to Grandcourt's boredom in *Daniel Deronda*. In Eliot, boredom is rarely a sign of physical and mental health, yet in *The Mill on the Floss* the emphasis is different. Amongst the female community surrounding Maggie boredom binds society with everyday rituals; it acts as a prelude to desire, and does not necessarily entail a wasted life but can also create an imaginative realm through which to re-engage with the world. By turning her back on Stephen Guest, Lee argues, Maggie draws on the imaginative boon provided by boredom.

Lucy Deane provides a very different picture of inactivity, and has often been dismissed as an all-too-passive model of femininity in contrast to the vibrant Maggie. Barbara Hardy (Birkbeck and Swansea) read her short story, 'A Portrait of Lucy Deane', an affecting rehabilitation of Maggie's cousin. Set in the aftermath of the flood, Stephen has recently returned from Italy, intends to stand for Parliament, and has been urging Lucy to meet with him, and possibly renew their engagement. In two scenes, one with her father, and the other with Philip in his artist's studio, Lucy deftly analyses her relationship with the novel's protagonists. She ponders how, despite his actions, she might still have accepted Stephen as her husband had Maggie survived the flood, but cannot now that Maggie is dead. Moreover, she has outgrown him: Lucy, here, is no decorative, inconvenient obstacle but a mature woman, about to set out for Brussels to work in a school.

The final paper, Catherine Brown's (Oxford) '*The Mill on the BBC in 1978*', reflected on another form of revision: a television adaptation. Brown reminded audiences that Eliot might

have been looking back at the antiquarian days of the novel's setting in much the same way as audiences now look back at the context of the BBC adaptation. Whereas Eliot repeatedly draws attention to the differences between past and present, however, the adaptation seeks to smooth over a sense of estrangement. Brown commented on many of the choices made by the director, such as the decision to change the actors playing Tom halfway through, but not the one playing the role of Philip, or the adaptation's decision to believe the worst of the scandal when Maggie returns from her elopement with Stephen.

The conference included an exhibition that paid tribute to a new generation of *Mill on the Floss* readers: photographs of the King Edward players' (Nuneaton) theatrical adaptation of the novel. The exhibition was a fitting complement to an event that had focused throughout on ideas of inheritance and adaptation, and, through the programme successfully put together by Barbara Hardy and Louise Lee, encouraged delegates to renew their personal engagement with *The Mill on the Floss*.