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## Review of George Eliot's Feminism: 'The Right to Rebellion'

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**June Skye Szirotny, *George Eliot's Feminism: 'The Right to Rebellion'*  
(Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. ix + 284.  
ISBN 978 1 137 40614 9. £60.**

This luminous new work – dedicated to ‘the millions of women deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness by society’s misogynist myths’ – casts fresh light on George Eliot’s feminism, which has often been the subject of controversy. ‘I want to show’, says the author, ‘that however ambivalent George Eliot was about practical matters, she strongly accepted most of the ideals of contemporary feminists [...]. [S]he moves, through her works, from a repudiation of rebellion against conventional views of women to an acceptance of that rebellion in her later works; and, in each of her major works, she supports one or more causes of contemporary feminists [...] against patriarchy’s privileging of men’ (32).

Benjamin Jowett commented: ‘There was a time when [Eliot] greatly desired to write something for the good of women’ (27); but she was doubtless also afraid that overtly expressed ideas combined with her anomalous position with Lewes in society would harm the women’s movement. Attitudes have shifted so much that we now find it difficult to grasp how, especially early on, Eliot was marginalized as a dangerous ‘scarlet woman’. The alcoholic heroine of ‘Janet’s Repentance’, a brave depiction of a woman suffering at the hands of her brutal, drunken husband, though even with legal sanction (77), was then the least popular of Eliot’s characters, in a story, according to Harriet Martineau, pervaded with ‘moral squalor’; but the strong disapproval of Janet’s own drinking, manifest in (and out of) the novel, betrays the double standard then prevalent in a society which often admired her husband’s large capacity for alcohol consumption. Maggie Tulliver was seen as wicked, and *The Mill* was often forbidden reading for girls, who, as Florence Nightingale complained, were taught that ‘women have no passions’ (228, n68). Lady Amberly, four years before her marriage, was allowed only to read the first half, while in 1885, when 19-year-old Harriet Weaver was caught reading the novel, the village minister publicly reprimanded her from the pulpit (230, n89). Indeed, the sexual passion between Stephen and Maggie still has the power to move and disturb readers: we are here in stormy Brontë territory.

June Szirotny’s monograph is, in fact, the place to find what Eliot and other nineteenth-century writers actually thought about the oppression of women, unencumbered by anachronistic political views and the self-satisfied denunciations by ‘radical’ feminists, particularly of the 1970s and 1980s, who at their most extreme argued for the removal of Eliot from the canon. As Gillian Beer once commented, there is something fundamentally wrong when such women try to exclude the most high-achieving woman from the sisterhood. Szirotny, however, casts her net wide across the nineteenth century, in the sensible belief that Eliot’s feminism needs to be evaluated by comparison with contemporary writers – from the notorious bathos of Mrs Ellis (according to whom married women’s ‘highest duty’ was ‘to suffer and be still’; for woman ‘has nothing, and is nothing, of herself’, 229), to radical John Stuart Mill and that public protester against her husband’s cruelty, Caroline Norton, who both, unlike Eliot, had doubts about married women pursuing a vocation, an issue that divided contemporary feminists; and thence to Florence Nightingale, who states in ‘Cassandra’ (1859) – a seminal work – that some women chose celibacy and the ‘sacrifice [of] marriage, because they sacrifice all other life if they accept it’; for, Nightingale asks, having vulgarly ‘sold herself for an establishment’, is a woman any better than ‘those we cannot name [prostitutes]?’ (235). Thus Szirotny, in one of her many parallels between Eliot’s novels and contemporary theory,

argues that Romola, depicted as having suffered a brutal marriage, and in order to promote female autonomy, sets up 'a community of women' at the novel's end – thus following contemporary feminists who encouraged 'numerous "redundant women" [...] to form networks', to avoid a corrupted, self-serving and brutal patriarchy (105).

Not one to mince words, Szirotny decries patriarchy as an 'evil [that] is often intolerable', a view she attributes to Eliot, probably rightly (though Eliot would not have used words like 'patriarchy' and 'feminism', which only came into vogue near the end of the century) (188-9). Clearly driven by strong emotion, Szirotny reveals an extraordinarily thorough reading of her subject. This could only be the product of years of immersion in Eliot's fiction. Relatively unknown, short pieces of Eliot's journalism are also profitably looked at, which show surprisingly forthright statements on woman's position at an earlier time when Eliot was not constrained by fiction-writing to avoid 'decided deliverances' – not least of these, her deprecation of relations between the sexes where woman is regarded as a chattel – 'a mere piece of furniture, or livestock, too insignificant to determine in any degree a man's happiness or misery' ('Menander', 1853, 26), something which brings a character like Lydgate to mind.

Through intensive readings of Eliot's fiction, therefore, informed by a fine, close study of her life's story, this book's argument, that Eliot was more radically engaged with the Woman Question than is commonly thought, is convincing. Certainly, I know of no Victorian novelist who depicts so powerfully the terrible sufferings of women at the hands of power-loving men. Eliot, as Szirotny demonstrates with sustained acuity in this long work, almost always critiques patriarchy's double standards in her fiction, and espouses the right of women to marry whom they please (though not always with happy results when they get their way, as in the case of Dorothea and Casaubon). She implicitly argues for the pursuit of education, and a vocation in a world which put barriers up for women seeking careers in a society which disliked middle-class women engaging in any significant occupation. She maintains clearly if indirectly the right to child custody, as is demonstrated for instance in argument over Eppie's best place of domicile in *Silas Marner*. She depicts a woman's entitlement to leave a husband who is a malefactor who takes part in crime and continuous betrayal of others, as we see in Romola's difficult 'right to rebellion'; and Janet Dempster permanently leaves her spouse after he throws her out on a cold night. Also, Gwendolen's intense pain, psychologically but probably also sexually at the hands of her sadistic husband in *Deronda*, where her virtual imprisonment leads to an inevitable, intense wish for his death, is surely a silent plea for divorce. Eliot's complexity is suggested by the fact that in *The Spanish Gypsy*, Fedalma's self-sacrifice is not only seen as heroic, she is also seen as a young girl victimized in an androcentric world (119). The final chapter on the many instances of child abuse, which Szirotny ably uncovers in *Daniel Deronda*, is especially poignant.

Szirotny's study includes a psychological analysis of Eliot and her traumatic early experiences, to interpret how these experiences affected her writings, how the working through of problems in her creative life became a catalyst which helped radicalize her subsequent art, relatively speaking; and this section is a *tour de force*, unfortunately too complex to detail here. The temptation to 'get into the head' of one's subject carries the risk that the writer reveals as much about herself as about her subject, but Szirotny manages skilfully to retain objectivity and distance. She cites Eliot's remark that at best, 'Human happiness is a web with many threads of pain [in] it' (*L*, III, 230). Comments by Cross and Haight on Eliot's 'need to be loved', over which much ink has been spilled, are bravely re-assessed. Yes, she often stood alone and against others with courage, but she *did* also suffer from a morbid dependency on the

love of those she was close to. Like Maggie, painful difficulties with her conventional, bourgeois family and the fact that she was undervalued because a girl created, as the author contends, a narcissistic disturbance, which Eliot decries as her 'egoism'. She was 'abnormally bonded to others because, from a young age, she felt loved, and thus able to survive, *only* as she served others' needs' (79; emphasis added) – something Lewes and Agnes and the children had good reason to appreciate. The need of women to serve at this time was common. Florence Nightingale states: 'The family uses people, *not* [...] for what they are intended to be, but for what it wants from them – its own uses' (229). Eliot herself commented that her own youthful experience was worse than Maggie's in her novel – 'Everything is softened, as compared with real life' (229). Again and again, though not given to exaggeration, she tells us that *no one* could have suffered worse from years of loneliness and 'terrible pain' – how she had frequently been 'inert and suffering' (18). Szironty states astutely that Eliot's early idealists are unable to maintain rebellion against their fathers, and resignation is enjoined, because of their intense emotional dependence on a paternal figure, just as Eliot, engaging in a Holy War with her own father, eventually capitulated, despite her apostasy, to his demands. Thus in later works where rebellion becomes possible, the protagonists are able partially to protect their own boundaries because they are adopted and thus less neurotically unable to assert a tendency to rebellion. I would add that, suffering seriously from her own aggressive father fatigue, the author of *Romola* kills off every figure who can be construed as paternal in the novel, and this was cathartic: Romola's father, brother, uncle, husband, confessor, and father-in-law are all dispatched to the grave – thus largely freeing Eliot from the need to engage with fathers subsequently – except, at the end of her career, for Alcharisi's repudiation of her controlling biological father in *Deronda* – an action which, however, has serious consequences for her health. There can be little doubt that the Princess's particular narrative is partly autobiographical. Furthermore, after her life began with Lewes, as Szironty points out, Eliot 'had never been so happy [...], and her happiness went on deepening as she found in her "one perfect love", [...] the sympathetic love she needed to function' (18).

Summing up the autobiographical nature of *The Mill*, Szironty comments: 'There is no more accurate portrayal of the unhappiness of many Victorian girls under patriarchy than in this novel' [...]. *The Mill* is probably her grimmest work. It is not so much Maggie's death that tears us apart but our understanding that the world will be no better for the cataclysm [...]. But Maggie is dumb; she could never make anyone understand her, and a silenced Maggie leaves us no reason to think her sad story will not continue to be enacted' (78).

This is an extremely distinguished work, and I regret that a short review can only give us a glimpse of the excellent analyses of the novels; I have decided to concentrate on *The Mill*, to give some idea of the flavor of the entire work. There are, however, occasional anomalies that sit uncomfortably beside the richness of the whole – a sporadic want of nuance that leads the author to label the adulterous Mrs Transome as a 'malefactor', in a work where the male 'sinners', guilty of far worse, suffer far less grievous consequences. Tito Melema, more appropriately, is also labeled a 'malefactor'; but why is Arthur Donnithorne a 'stereotypical malefactor'? Nevertheless, this work succeeds in justifying its hypothesis that Eliot was more interested in women's difficulties than she has often been given credit for. It helps us to gain more insight into the enigmatic genius of the woman who called herself George Eliot.

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