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Review of George Eliot, Poetess

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**Wendy S. Williams, *George Eliot, Poetess* (Ashgate Publishing, 2014),
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The word 'poetess' is contentious. For some it rankles, because the diminution of 'poet' is generally considered gratuitous, patronizing and offensive. More often than not, it belittles women writers and their work. Others, however, argue that it is a useful word with which to describe poets belonging to the 'poetess tradition'. That particular tradition demands our attention, they argue, and requires detailed study. In 2003, Peggy Davis wrote that such work had only just begun but more biographical research was needed 'to establish a more prominent place for the poetess in particular and, more generally, women's poetry in literary criticism and history'.¹ *George Eliot, Poetess* can be seen as one response to that call to fill in the gaps.

In her Introduction and five additional chapters, Williams offers interpretations of George Eliot's poems that have received little or no critical attention, namely 'Erinna', 'How Lisa Loved the King', 'Brother and Sister', 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible', 'Mid the Rich Store of Nature's Gifts to Man' and 'Agatha'. She also looks in detail at the more frequently considered *Armstrong*, and in lesser detail at some of the other, mostly overlooked, poems. And, very significantly, she urges us to see Eliot as a poetess, freer to comment on social issues in her poetry than in her novels.

In Chapter 1, 'The Poetess Tradition', the religious atmosphere of nineteenth-century Britain is examined, specifically how women poets found limited public forums for expressing religious ideas. By the end of the eighteenth century, poetry as worship was closely associated with feminine feelings, Williams says, and by the end of the nineteenth century the notion of the 'poet as prophet' was commonplace, giving women poets a special status to pronounce on all sorts of moral issues. Eliot worked in that tradition. Consider her detailed knowledge of Christian and Judaic religions worked into her poetry: the midrashic account of Moses's last days on Earth in 'The Death of Moses' (ca 1876) and a very brief reference found in Genesis 4 as the germ for 'The Legend of Jubal' (1869-70). Consider also how poetesses used foreign settings, thereby escaping gender restrictions. As a result, we have Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy* (1864-68), Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* (1881), all set in distant lands. When looking closely at 'Erinna' (c.1873-1876), Williams encourages us to see the female narrator as someone giving voice to the idea of women overcoming societal restrictions; and Eliot does so by creating verse that enlightens, elevates and endures.

Williams looks more closely at the religious aspects of Eliot's poetry in Chapter 2, 'Prophet of Sympathy'. Having first contributed to her century's religious uncertainty, by translating David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1854), she later joined the poetess tradition, which promoted traditional, religious and female ideals. For Eliot, the highest ideal was sympathy. The first indication of her substituting sympathy for religion, according to Williams, is seen in 'Mid the Rich Store of Nature's Gifts to Man' (ca 1842) where certain lines recall New Testament teaching to do with individuals serving the greater community. By the time she wrote 'O May I Join the Choir Invisible' (August 1867), Williams says, Eliot saw sympathy as aspiring to serve the community. Thus somewhere in that period between these two poems, she became a poetess, gradually adopting the 'feminine language of affect' – a characteristic language of the poetess tradition largely created by women. Williams argues that this language allowed women access,

as it were, to debates on social issues from which they would otherwise have been excluded.

Another poetess characteristic, subverting conventional ideas and beliefs, is dealt with in chapter 3, 'Sexual Politics in Poetry'. Williams discovers that particular technique in 'Brother and Sister' (1869) and 'How Lisa Loved the King' (1869). The sonnet sequence, Williams claims, subverts from the outset, describing the confining situation of the girl, even though, as a child, the girl was once content to follow her brother's dictates. What Eliot really gives us is a critique of the sibling relationship. The society into which the children are born discourages genuine love and sympathy, and instead encourages gender specific codes of conduct favouring the boy. The adult female narrator of the sonnets, who addresses us, exposes those moral failings, thereby questioning prescribed relationships foisted on men and women. Similarly, 'How Lisa Loved the King' confronts the limited and restrictive choices, and otherwise unfair practices, facing nineteenth-century women when it came to marriage. In an endnote, Williams says Lisa's betrothal to Perdicone (from the Italian 'perdita', or 'lost') can be understood to suggest that Lisa will eventually lose her identity. Eliot's ironic tone of voice throughout the poem, largely created by the Courtly Love role reversal (Lisa woos the King, instead of the King wooing Lisa) further subverts traditional attitudes to love and marriage. By these methods, Williams argues, we see Eliot emphasizing the need for sympathy and respect for women.

The fourth chapter, 'Mother to the Nation', looks at Eliot's involvement with the community of women and her identification with motherhood. Williams recalls the many intimate friendships Eliot had with school friends, teachers and other women during her Nuneaton and Coventry days, and especially the women 'disciples' she encouraged when she was famous. Williams's point, here, is to stress the comfort Eliot found as a spiritual mother and to show that these intense relationships, particularly the maternal ones, are reflected in the poetry. For any poetess, 'motherhood was a powerful symbol of self-resignation, duty and spiritual nurturing', and that sentiment was shared by Eliot, who saw herself as a spiritual mother to her readers and the nation, guiding them in all things moral. Motherhood is at the heart of 'Armgarth' (1870) and 'Agatha' (1869). Armgarth's singing is her 'child', and, when she loses her voice, she grieves as a mother does. She eventually decides on adopting 'another's living child' (future pupils she will coach?) and so intends to join the community from which she once stood apart. Agatha is depicted as a spiritual mother to her community. Like Armgarth and the heroine of *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), Fedalma, Agatha lives abroad, well away from the societal standards of femininity found in nineteenth-century Britain. This was deliberately done so Eliot could focus on her own ideas of community and motherhood. Williams goes on, Eliot's idyllic description of Agatha's Black Forest village, use of a feminine, diminutive language, and her reliance on her contemporary readers' domestic values, which included the almost sacred idea of mothers being 'angels in the house', meant she could offer a 'different model of spirituality' – again, sympathy for others.

In her final chapter, 'The Future of George Eliot Studies', Williams makes clear she has only begun to scratch the surface. More work needs to be done, she says, on Eliot's poetry and religion, especially her interest in Judaism; on her poetry and music; poetry and the invocation of memory; poetry and community, since she considers community from different angles, including disillusionment, isolation, imprisonment, alienation and romantic love. Still more work should be done on the overlapping ideas found in the novels and poetry, her use of chapter epigraphs, how sympathy is treated in the novels as opposed to the poetry where verse forms

and technique and religious forms and language all combine to create sympathy. Just as the poems within poems in 'How Lisa Loved the King' and *The Spanish Gypsy* create powerful emotions in listeners and move them to act in the common good, so by listening to the music of her poetry, says Williams, Eliot hoped we would also become sensible of the important ideas with which she is concerned.

Eliot's ideas are undoubtedly important, but many who have read the poems will perhaps hesitate about the supposed music with which ideas are transmitted. In August 1869, Eliot read all of Shakespeare's sonnets and commented on them in the Berg notebook (New York Public Library). She was pretty disparaging, calling them mainly 'artificial products', frequently overpraised by Bardologists. Still, a few years later she added: 'Nevertheless, I love the Sonnets better & better whenever I return to them. They are tunes that for some undefinable reason suit my frame.' Can the same be said about her poetry? Is it, perhaps, more accurate to say her poetry is, together with *Romola*, among her most interesting work, but not her best or most enjoyable?

That hesitation does not at all detract from Williams's book, however. It offers interpretations of the poems that are always interesting and thought provoking, and it makes a strong case for seeing Eliot as a poetess. A scholar, Williams is also an award-winning teacher – someone who knows how to make complex ideas accessible to both experienced students of Eliot and newcomers. The latter will find a good deal of carefully researched background information on nineteenth-century social and religious issues, and wide-ranging biographical information on Eliot, all put to good use in what is a genuinely stimulating book.

1 Peggy Davis, 'Recent Criticism of the Poetess: A Review Essay', *Romanticism on the Net*, Number 29-30, February-May 2003, *The Transatlantic Poetess*, Guest-edited by Laura Mandell. For an interesting defence of 'poetess', see Introduction to the Poetess Archive, *The Poetess Archive*, ed. Laura Mandell (<http://idhmc.tamu.edu/poetess/about/index.html#term>).

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