

George Eliot, Early and Late

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Fionnuala Dillane, *Before George Eliot: Marian Evans and the Periodical Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 270 pp., \$95.00 cloth.

Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot in Society: Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013), 178 pp., \$55.95 cloth.

These two important contributions deal with opposite ends of George Eliot's career. *Before George Eliot* examines the rather neglected period when Marian Evans was making her way as an editor and then briefly as a freelance journalist in London before she became a novelist. By contrast, *George Eliot in Society* looks at the Leweses Sunday afternoon salons at the Priory and their travel to foreign spas in the last decade of her career when she was already firmly established as George Eliot, the writer of *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Romola*, and *Felix Holt, the Radical*.

Fionnuala Dillane's *Before George Eliot* examines Marian Evans' relationship with the periodical press and the personae she constructed, including the "character of editress" (Evans' own ironic description); the ambiguously gendered reviewer; the casuist and companion of her clerical scenes who is at once obvious and opaque"; and finally the "pompous city bachelor Theophrastus Such" (6). Dillane argues that in the early work the often fractured, evasive, and inconsistent voices that emerge are much influenced by and are a product of the need to conform to the medium, and to entertain and maintain the interest of audiences constructed as markets by the corporate periodical and publishing industries.

A closely-argued first chapter discusses authority and audience-making in the format and layout of *The Westminster Review* in the early 1850s and examines the influence of Marian Evans as the elusive and ambiguously placed “editress,” mostly invisible and working in the shadow of the notional editor John Chapman. Although Dillane recognizes the impossibility of understanding fully the extent of Evans’ work at *The Westminster* – her journal from this time is missing and the records from *The Westminster* have not been preserved – she draws on evidence from letters and the pages of individual installments to argue that Evans was to all intents and purposes the real editor of the *Review*. A detailed discussion of her correspondence with contributors helps clarify the extent of her role and shows her awareness of the need to balance the expression of individual opinions with the corporate demands of the periodical voice itself, determined largely by the patrons, subscribers, and the market. Though she ultimately has little control over content, Evans is seen intervening incisively in the articles of contributors while remaining conscious of the limitations of the editorial role, and it was she who made sure that contributors got paid for their work. Evans’ hand is present in the reorganization of *The Westminster* and the selection and layout of articles as well as a rethinking of the book review section based on surveys of national literatures, which proved an influential and popular format in the 1850s. Conscious of the limitations in her own method of argument, and acknowledging that it is not always possible to say who actually instigated changes, Dillane resists the temptation to make too much of the available evidence. Nevertheless, she builds a persuasive picture of Evans as an increasingly savvy business-minded editor effectively running the letterpress in the early 1850s and operating in an increasingly sophisticated market-driven environment.

Dillane goes on to argue that Evans’ own journalistic production has too often been read through the lens of her later career as George Eliot the novelist, and treated as merely a prolegomenon for the novels, to be mined for simple, concise statements of her “philosophy.” However, her articles need to be read as pieces by a journalist “working for [her] bread” and responding “to the often prescriptive trammels of the individual journal or editorial line by engaging in the strident, rhetorical mode that marked the medium [...]

embedded in this mid-century periodical marketplace" (80). Discussion of the forward trajectory of influence in *Before George Eliot* brings into clear focus the many often subtle ways in which Evans' relationship with the periodical press help us to understand both the making of the professional writer and her later response to writerly fame as George Eliot – as expressed particularly in her last work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Dillane's exploration of this influence includes a detailed examination of how the journalistic periodical voices carry over and are felt in Eliot's first fiction through the persona of the male *Blackwood's* narrator, and through her use of the melodrama and pathos which are so much a part of the Victorian periodical oeuvre. The "*Blackwood's* man" persona adopted as narrator for her first fiction was well known to her from her own articles and is characterized well by *The Saturday Review*, which speculated that the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* might be "some studious clergyman, a Cantab, who is the father of family, of high church tendencies and exceedingly fond of children, Greek dramatists and dogs" (qtd. Dillane 109). The corporate "we" of the *Blackwood's* article is carried over into *Scenes*, as is the distinctly recognizable *Blackwood's* tone, carefully analyzed by Dillane. Her productive discussion of the role of melodrama yields a revealing rereading of *Scenes* in light of the context, conventions, and style of the periodical for which it was intended. Critics have often been uncomfortable with the heightened rhetorical aspects of Eliot's early fiction style, which sits uneasily with the sometimes deliberately understated ways in which she usually addresses the tragedy of the human condition, and they have tried to explain away these occasional lapses, relegating them to the periphery of her fiction. But Dillane's reading of passages such as the following from "Mr Gilfil's Love Story" significantly disrupts such readings:

See how she rushes noiselessly, like a pale meteor, along the passages and up the gallery stairs! Those gleaming eyes, those bloodless lips, that swift, silent tread, make [Tina] look like the incarnation of a fierce purpose rather than a woman. [...] Yes, there are sharp weapons in the gallery. There is a dagger in that cabinet; she knows it well. [...] she darts to the cabinet, takes out the dagger and thrusts it into her pocket. [...]

Her hand is in her pocket, clenching the handle of the dagger,
which she holds half out of its sheath. (qtd. Dillane 134)

George Eliot, writing her first fiction for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, was very much aware of the need to vary style to entertain and maintain the interest of her periodical serial readers. She knew that audience well and had it very much in mind, and it is in these moments of heightened rhetoric "that we can see how she constructs her audience, figuring the reader in the text through apostrophe, humour and emotional appeal" (130).

The theme of the periodical press as audience-making carries over into the later chapters. "George Eliot" was "a name without a person" in an age when the nineteenth-century cult of celebrity was taking hold and the periodical press was searching for the "real" person behind the fiction (17). According to Dillane, Evans consistently resisted interviews and photographs, so that the construction of the public image of George Eliot was largely beyond her control or influence, and she sees in the lack of a visual authentication an "embodied authenticity," the origins of the creation of George Eliot as either the writer of pastoral novels set in a local landscape or as the incorporeal creator of cerebral diagrammatic figures such as *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*. It is only in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, argues Dillane, that George Eliot tries to wrestle back some control over her constructed image when she "turns on her audience with some venom" and attacks the periodical press for its simplistic categorization of writers for easy consumption and for the way it makes and unmakes literary reputations (19). Thus the periodical press that made the careers of Marian Evans as editor and journalist and George Eliot the writer of novels is here deconstructed by a writer angry and disturbed by restrictive assessments by her readers and critics. Dillane's rereading of *Impressions* by situating it within the framework of the Victorian periodical press proves instructive, and her closely focused final chapter sheds much light on Eliot's perplexing final work.

Part of Dillane's argument is that *Impressions* was written from Eliot's position as "a social outcast to the majority of her peers for most of her life," by a person who moved in "a much narrower social world" than other "journalist-editors-essayists-novelists such as Thackeray, Dickens and

Trollope" (188). This view of Eliot as social outcast for most of her life and with little acquaintance with the wider world is strongly refuted in Kathleen McCormack's *George Eliot in Society*. Subtitled *Travels Abroad and Sundays at the Priory*, the book concentrates on the extreme contradiction in Eliot's life: between her social exclusion in the early years of her union with Lewes, and the last decade of her life in the 1870s when they enjoyed frequent social events, concerts, operas, dinners, weekends, excursions, and salons in the company of important and respected Victorian contemporaries. McCormack notes how this change is also reflected in Eliot's fiction in the shift from the rural characters of *Adam Bede* to the lords and ladies of *Daniel Deronda*.

For McCormack, the disproportionate attention paid to Eliot's early years has contributed to the misconception that she remained outside of respectable society all her life. Biographies quoting from only a small number of recollections of Eliot have tended to play down the importance of the salons of the 1870s, and the traditional version of *Sundays at the Priory* is either of a series of rather dull occasions with the mostly male guests "approaching the sibyl one by one to express their almost pious devotion," or alternatively as "scandalous" owing to the composition of the guest list (2). McCormack shows how Gordon Haight in particular draws heavily on Charles Eliot Norton's rather negative description of the Leweses and their home, in which the "vulgar" Lewes is shown playing host to a crowd including "mannish, heedless or vulgar" women (7-8). Similarly, John Fiske, who visited on three occasions only, is given disproportionate space by Haight to the exclusion of a whole series of more regular visitors. Even among these, though, there are those who give a somewhat negative picture of the salons. Rudolph Lehmann, who visited the Priory on more than twenty occasions and whose wife sang there more than any other guest, recalled that "as a rule, so-called 'society' does not visit this sanctuary" (qtd. McCormack 10). McCormack comments that, while it is true that the very upper echelons of society did not visit the Priory, "Lehmann's unexpectedly harsh and heavy-handed humor exemplifies the caution necessary when evaluating the various degrees of reliability among the Priory guests' descriptions" (10). True as this may be, McCormack does quite succeed in dispelling the suspicion that the Sunday salons may

sometimes have been rather hard going, despite Lewes' best efforts in circling about as the "social cement" of the gatherings.

Through Eliot's *Westminster Review* article "Woman in France: Madame de Sablé," McCormack links the Leweses' salon with the French salons of Madame de Sablé, the Marquise de Rambouillet, and Mademoiselle d'Orleans, and sees Sundays at the Priory as carrying forward this tradition. She contends that the de Sablé essay both anticipates Sundays at the Priory and helps to explain one of the "trouble spots" of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's future role beyond the novel as the wife of Ladislaw. The salon, she argues, makes this future much less trivializing and disappointing a conclusion than has been assumed in much criticism of the novel, for Dorothea will move in a world that includes serious intellectual conversation and politics and will allow her to exert influence. For McCormack, this is a perspective gained directly from Eliot's own experience. She attended John Chapman's regular Friday evening soirées at 142 The Strand, with its lively literary and social activity, took part in serious and intelligent conversation, and met many authors, some of whom later became guests at the Priory. In 1854-55 the Leweses attended the sophisticated Berlin salon of Henriette Solmar, and then in Paris in 1867 that of Mary Mohl, itself in a line of descent reaching back to the famous French salons of Madame Récamier.

Thus Eliot had a clear sense of international salons when she and Lewes began their own salons at the Priory in 1869. The picture that emerges from McCormack's research is of Eliot and Lewes welcoming a wide variety of guests into their home, sometimes expending much energy and overcoming their own physical or mental ailments to do so. The guests included editors, authors, reviewers and fiction writers with connections to Victorian periodicals, and the salons became occasions on which much publishing business was conducted and which furthered the Leweses' own self promotion, most famously when Eliot read from her own works in progress such as "The Spanish Gipsy," and later *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. They were also the occasions for pleasurable entertainment when musical recitals of singing were offered to guests. The guest lists in Lewes' diaries and journals show a rich and varied group of people at the salons: contrary to

common belief, there were significant numbers of women attending, as McCormack's impressive index testifies, as well as important Victorian writers and intellectuals, including single visits by Dickens, Bagehot, and Ruskin, and more regular attendance by Trollope, Browning, and Tennyson. Although Haight, writing in the 1950s, hesitated to acknowledge it, there were also a good number of gay and lesbian guests. Eliot's relationships with many of her guests are explored in detail, and *George Eliot in Society* undoubtedly changes and complicates our understanding of her, though Eliot herself sometimes remains a rather shadowy figure several steps behind the ebullient Lewes. These views contrast with John Cross's "sanitized" account of Eliot's salons as "important as a meeting-place for many friends whom she cared greatly to see, but it was not otherwise important in her own life" (qtd. McCormack 14). McCormack makes a strong case that "during the Winter social season, she and Lewes together indefatigably conducted one of the most visited, vital, and influential London salons of the decade" (153).

The Leweses began to pay regular visits to German spas in the 1860s, visiting twelve different spas between 1866 and 1873. In some they stayed for extended periods from ten days to over three weeks, while they took the waters, and walked and climbed in the mountains and forests. It was during their stay at Bad Homburg in 1872 that the incident described as the germ of *Daniel Deronda* occurred when the Leweses witnessed Lord Byron's grandniece gambling recklessly at roulette, and Lewes had earlier pointed out the gambling at Baden Baden to Eliot in 1868. As McCormack explains, both these places contribute to the setting of Leubronn and the characters for chapters that establish and develop the gambling theme in *Daniel Deronda*.

With John Cross, Eliot visited Bad Wilbad and Baden Baden in 1880, when she had recourse to their restorative powers during her disastrous honeymoon after Cross's supposedly suicidal leap into the Grand Canal in Venice. McCormack's account of that incident is interesting. While acknowledging Cross's history of mental illness, she tries to debunk a number of the myths surrounding his jump for, as Walter Sichel wrote some years later, "the silliest gossip was bruited about their honeymoon" (qtd. McCormack 141). McCormack's preferred version is that Cross, a strong

athlete and swimmer unable to exercise or swim in the company of his new bride and affected by the heat, filth, and dirt of Venice, may have jumped into the canal in a “defiant gesture,” refusing help from the gondoliers because he was such a strong swimmer rather than because he wished to drown. It is a measure of Eliot’s faith in German spas that her reaction was to head for the mountains and Bad Wilbad, well known for the quality of its care, its English physicians, and its famous swimming baths where Cross could exercise. Here they stayed for nine days while Cross recovered, with a further two days spent at Baden Baden before returning to England.

Before George Eliot and *George Eliot in Society* are linked thematically. Evans’ early career as editor and journalist negotiating and moving in literary and journalistic circles in London helps explain Eliot the savvy novelist managing her own salons in the 1870s to mold her literary reputation through creating and maintaining connections with London literary and intellectual society. Where Dillane argues that the way in which the periodical press constructed their image of George Eliot was largely beyond her control, McCormack builds a persuasive case that through the salons Eliot ably exerted influence over that image in the 1870s, and that she and Lewes were prepared to expend considerable energy in doing so. The importance of the Sunday salons and the visits to continental spas for Eliot’s later fiction is of course that she was able to draw on her own immediate experience in creating scenes and characters, though, for the most part, McCormack resists the temptation to look for specific models for Eliot’s characters at the spas or among the guests at the Priory. In its exploration of what she put of her “real” self into the novels, and of how the many meetings at the Priory and abroad, the music, and Eliot’s knowledge of German spa culture fed into the creation of scenes or characters in the novels, *George Eliot in Society* may be read as a continuation of the Victorian search for an “embodied authenticity” for “George Eliot,” who is indeed brought closer to us through the many interactions and recollections that form the subject of this book.

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