

It was she, and only she

Fictive commemorations of 'Victorian England's greatest novelist'

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IN LOVE WITH GEORGE ELIOT

Kathy O'Shaughnessy
400pp. Scrib. £16.99.

ONE MUGGY MORNING IN JULY, I made my way to Chelsea to the pavement outside 4 Cheyne Walk, where George Eliot - by then Mrs John Cross - died. It was an anticlimactic pilgrimage. Only a blue plaque on the house (now privately owned, its front garden littered and unkempt) acknowledged that it was once home to Victorian England's greatest novelist. Just around the corner lived Thomas Carlyle, at 24 Cheyne Row: now a carefully preserved National Trust property, which has been open to admirers since 1895.

While the Brontës' once isolated parsonage at Haworth is a major tourist destination, and Jane Austen's House Museum at Chawton attracts legions of devoted fans, Griff House, where George Eliot grew up, is now a Beefeater steak restaurant. The George Eliot Fellowship is fundraising to build a visitors' centre on the site, but for the time being enthusiasts will have to make do with an uninspiring facade and a plate of chips.

Readers seeking fictive homages to Eliot's life or works are similarly underserved - and she fares especially poorly in comparison with the endless proliferation of Jane Austen-inspired titles. This imbalance doubtless arises from the contrast between the ready satisfaction Austen offers her readers and Eliot's insistence on dissatisfaction, both with ourselves and with our world. Austen's ruthless social and moral criticisms are made not just palatable but pleasurable by how deftly she enlists us on her side, delighting us with a sense of shared superiority, and of justice for those so happily rewarded. Reading Eliot, in contrast, we are drawn into a fellowship of the flawed, the disappointed, the thwarted. The only truth universally acknowledged in Eliot's fiction is that our lives are shaped, for better and worse, by our own actions and their inescapable consequences: "children may be strangled", as she rather chillingly declares in *Romola*, "but deeds never". Eliot's vision is both more profound and tragic than Austen's; though she can be every bit as funny, she isn't nearly as much fun.

Austen provides a model both imitable and marketable; both intellectually and artistically, Eliot is more intimidating. No wonder so few novelists have engaged overtly with her character or legacy - and that the results have so seldom lived up to it. Cynthia Ozick's drily charming "Puttermesser Paired" (in her collection *The Puttermesser Papers*, 1997) is a rare if brief pleasure. In it, Ruth Puttermesser and her lover idealize the relationship between Eliot and Lewes as "a marriage of two minds". "Boon companions!", Puttermesser thinks. "It was fellowship they were studying; it was nearness." But Puttermesser resists "mixing herself up with a famous dead Victorian", and Ozick's self-aware ironies similarly insulate her from disadvantageous comparisons. Generally, the looser the connection, the better the result: the epigraphs from *Middlemarch* in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and Carol Shields's *Unless* (2002) open up thoughtful conversations between the two authors' disparate novels, but Keith Oatley's *A Natural History* (1998), while a competent recasting of *Middlemarch*, still inevitably seems insubstantial next to the original, and Diana Souhami's *Gwendolen* (2014), which purports to retell *Daniel Deronda* from Gwendolen Harleth's perspective, is just misguided, given that fully half of Eliot's much richer and more philosophically sophisticated novel does exactly that.

Fictional treatments of Eliot herself, such as Deborah Weisgall's *The World Before Her* (2008) and Dinitia Smith's *The Honeymoon* (2016), or the sections of Souhami's *Gwendolen* in which - through the magic of metafiction - the creator and her creation come face to face, are often not just unsatisfactory but exasperating. With depressing consistency, they expend more energy on Eliot's short marriage to Cross, especially its troubled Venetian honeymoon (during which, for reasons we will never know, Cross jumped from their hotel window into a canal), than on the daring break with Victorian mores that launched the happy previous decades she spent living unmarried with George Henry Lewes until his death in 1878. Worse, they repeatedly focus on her personal life at the expense of her thought and art. None of them achieve for Eliot what Colm Tóibín did for Henry James in *The Master* (2004): clearly and lovingly Jamesian in its own sensibility, Tóibín's novel is suffused with melancholy insight into the cost of being a person "on whom nothing is lost". In contrast, writers persistently seem to peel off Marian Evans from her authorial persona, unable or unwilling to examine, on the same literary terms, what it meant to be George Eliot.

The newest addition to the small and rather dour catalogue of Eliot biofiction is Kathy O'Shaughnessy's *In Love with George Eliot*. Published to coincide with Eliot's bicentenary, it is, despite the upbeat promise of its title, hardly celebratory. It follows the now-familiar pattern of interleaving historical fictionalization with a contemporary story presumably meant to elucidate or complement it in some way. O'Shaughnessy's modern protagonist is Kate Boyd, a professor at the fictional Queen Elizabeth College in London. Kate and her colleague Ann are organizing a summer conference on George Eliot. They are also both writing books about Eliot, but while Ann's is properly academic - "a revisionary critique ... of Eliot from a political, feminist viewpoint" - Kate's is "a novel based on fact - biography, letters, diaries". "A novel!", exclaims Ann when Kate confesses what she is up to, "her eyebrows shooting up."

This fraught exchange doesn't just remind us that Kate's choice of fiction over scholarship is professionally risky, it also raises an important question that applies, by extension, to O'Shaughnessy's book as well: what can or should a novel do that a biography cannot? If Kate's novel is the one we are reading in between her first-person segments (something O'Shaughnessy never directly confirms), it ought to answer that question; we certainly ought to know by the time we finish *In Love with George Eliot* what it can offer to those of us who have already read, for instance, Rosemary Ashton's *George Eliot: A Life* (1996) or Kathryn Hughes's *George Eliot: The last Victorian* (1998), both listed among O'Shaughnessy's sources.

Unfortunately, no good answer to that question emerges. Readers who know Eliot's biography already will not find it either enlivened or illuminated by this novel retelling, while those new to it will not learn from O'Shaughnessy why either Eliot or her writing should capture their hearts. For one thing, by skipping over Eliot's early life, O'Shaughnessy foregoes the opportunity to engage our sympathies on behalf of the ardent, rebellious girl who determinedly pursued the far-reaching education denied to her by class, sex and convention, and then boldly defied her family after losing her Christian faith. Instead, we meet her as a woman of thirty-two, moving to London to launch her career as a professional writer and editor. Though this, too, was a radical undertaking for a woman in 1852, O'Shaughnessy prefers to focus on its elements of sexual scandal and romantic failure: after moving in with the publisher John Chapman, who already lived with his wife and

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A page from *The Potter's Wheel*,
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mistress, Eliot was ousted due to their shared jealousy. "George Eliot's first London adventure", Kate remarks: "disastrous."

The novel as a whole is similarly preoccupied with Eliot's personal relationships - with Lewes and Cross, of course, and also with her many close women friends - including the feminist activist Barbara Bodichon and the writer and reformer Edith Simcox, whose passionate devotion both pleased and embarrassed Eliot. This is a potentially interesting angle. As Kate speculates, could Eliot's authorial voice have "been brewed by female friendship?" But too much is lost in isolating Eliot's private from her creative life. O'Shaughnessy reduces her creation to an anxious, emotionally needy and intermittently pompous soul; and while this may be partially accurate, we see little of the sharp, compassionate, wise and witty author of the novels. She could have animated that consciousness for us, exploring its varied dimensions and contradictions with sympathy and insight, in the spirit of Eliot herself.

It seems paradoxical that a novel called *In Love With George Eliot* should communicate so little enthusiasm about George Eliot. The interwoven contemporary story hints at a possible explanation. "I hold it against her", Ann says, "that she saw what she saw and was still so against, by and large, political action by women." This complaint, that "she lets women in her fiction dream and hope, but she doesn't show their lives becoming different, or fulfilled", is a longstanding one among feminist critics. Eliot herself was, as Ann puts it, "the giant exception, the great achiever", an anomaly rather than an advocate. O'Shaughnessy's tepid treatment perhaps reflects a similar ambivalence towards her subject. Yet Eliot's complicated reticence about what the Victorians called "the Woman Question" has not prevented generations of female readers from finding inspiration in her life, and both solace and stimulation in her work. O'Shaughnessy acknowledges this influence when Kate recalls reading *Middlemarch* after a painful breakup: "When everything seemed darker and chillier still ... it was she, and only she, who comforted me". So far, novels about Eliot, with their predictable deficiencies, have been poor substitutes for that profound experience. To understand what it means to be in love with George Eliot, it may be wiser to re-read *Middlemarch* instead. ■

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