

The Complete George Eliot: Biographical, Critical, and Cultural Contexts

George Eliot in Context. Edited by Margaret Harris. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 334 pp.

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<1>*George Eliot in Context* is a beautifully thorough and thoughtful account of the “range of relevancies” — to echo editor Margaret Harris’s own echo of *Middlemarch*’s narrator — that informs Eliot’s fiction and nonfiction writing. Casting its range broadly, the collection sets out to identify and illuminate these relevancies, and provides a greater number of shorter essays than is typical of an edited collection to do so. This goal and brevity means that the essays are not usually thesis driven, though compelling lines of argument that could be traced out with more space are everywhere suggested. Individual essays will serve as a reference point for a newcomer to George Eliot studies, and may fill in blind spots for more seasoned scholars. Reading the collection in its entirety, however, brings into view often less-read novels like *Romola* (1862-63) and *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866). More importantly, it also allows various threads — another favorite Eliot motif — to emerge and connect with one another in interesting and pleasurable ways.

<2>Organized in three parts, “Life and Afterlife,” “Critical Fortunes,” and “Cultural and Social Contexts,” the book’s arrangement indicates different sets of contexts. Biography does not entirely drop away after the first section, and is rather weaved into the fabric of the collection, often as supplemental to particular examples. There is little concern with methodological constraints on biography, since the goal is in part to fill out not just how Eliot’s work relates to its context but how her life does as well. Indeed, one of the threads that emerges early on, most notably in Margaret Harris’s two essays, “The Biographical Tradition” and “Afterlife,” is the significance the pen name “George Eliot” carried and continues to carry. According to Harris, the most recent biographical impulse acknowledges the *Athenaeum*’s obituary comment that “she herself was her greatest work” by enacting a “move back to the intensive reading of George Eliot’s life through her writing” (49). Certainly this is the move that informs the methodology of *George Eliot in Context*, even in the presentation of wider social and cultural contexts.

<3>The first section of the book to which Harris’s essays belong is a mine of information, rich with data. Joanne Shattock’s two essays, “Publishers and Publication” and “Editions of George Eliot’s Work,” could dizzy readers with figures. Shattock, however, explains the importance of these data by situating them in the context of the nineteenth-century literary marketplace. For example, the “radical experiment” (30) undertaken for the eight-part serial publication format of *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) was a reaction against the circulating

libraries' manipulation of prices. Particularly interesting is the inclusion of Nancy Henry's "Genre" essay in the "Life and Afterlife" section, a placement that draws on the "life through her writing" vein noted by Harris. Henry traces Eliot's career from early translations of Higher Criticism, through reviewing and editing roles in the periodical press, to the realist novels for which she is most well known. The essay also situates Eliot's short stories and poetry against the novels. Henry suggests, for example, that "The Lifted Veil" is able to explore "the limits and dangers of the sympathy she was advocating in the novels"; that "Brother Jacob" "allowed her to relax the demand that readers sympathize with her characters"; and that her poetry "deepened her exploration of humanism" (38-39). Henry devotes more time to these generative points of contrast than to the possibility that literary culture's "lingering suspicion" (38) of the artistic merit of novels spurred Eliot to write poetry, for which there is little persuasive evidence.

<4>Juliette Atkinson writes the entirety of the second section, "Critical Fortunes," which makes for a coherent narrative of more than a century of Eliot criticism. This section is organized chronologically and divided into critical responses to 1900, from 1900 to 1970, and from 1970 to the present. In this way, contexts both contemporary with Eliot and, later, with critical paradigms, come to bear on our understanding of Eliot's work and interpretations of it. Atkinson reads F.R. Leavis against his own grain on the relevance of Eliot's own moral character in interpreting her novels. She credits him with bringing about a new appreciation for her later novels, right before the 1950s shifted the focus on morality to a focus on form. Filling in a potential blind spot, Atkinson refers to this turn as "the most daring approach yet"; many of today's critics may find it difficult to imagine that "even among [Eliot's] admirers, structure and aesthetic considerations were rarely considered her strengths" (79). The section charting criticism from 1970 to the present takes feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial critical platforms by turn. Phrases like the "timely plea for moderation," and "It is perhaps surprising to note that *Daniel Deronda's* Gwendolen Harleth had to wait until the 1980s before she attracted serious feminist attention" (84) reveal hints of Atkinson's own impatience with ideological rather than contextual approaches. This is the direction in which she then moves, by turning to Eliot's engagement with the scientific, philosophical, and technological innovations of her own time. Insofar as these contexts are increasingly seen as "inextricably linked" to Eliot's "realist aesthetic" (89), the future for George Eliot criticism indicated by Atkinson seems to continue to invite New Historicist approaches, without sacrificing thorough investigations of form.

<5>In the third and longest section, connective threads emerge through repetition across the alphabetical, rather than thematic, organization. By far the most cited of her critical essays, Eliot's 1856 review of Wilhelm von Riehl's "The Natural History of German Life," appears again and again to demonstrate her philosophy on and aesthetics of bringing rural, historical peoples to life for modern readers. Another thread, often tied up with the "Natural History" review, is Eliot's gradualist conservatism. Robert Dingley in his "Politics" essay, for example, refers to "Natural History" and to Spencer, Comte, and Darwin, to illustrate the connection between Eliot's views on politics and on history.

<6>In "Historiography," Joanne Wilkes describes this latter view in more detail. While she stops short of calling Eliot's novels historiographical, Wilkes echoes Nancy Henry on "Genre" in an important acknowledgment that all of Eliot's novels, save *Daniel Deronda*, are historical. Wilkes not only nicely lays out the major players and models in nineteenth-century historiography —

Hegel as a predecessor, Higher Criticism, Whig history, Carlylean hero-worship, Auguste Comte's Positivism — but also points to a gap left open by these models that Eliot explores in her novels: the role of women in history. She situates Eliot as a believer in largely law-operated processes of gradual change; “hero” figures like Adam Bede and Felix Holt may be “representative of other obscure but conscientious workers for the benefit of their communities” (151), such that the role of the individual remains within the bounds of historical law.

<7>Realism emerges as another connective thread. Moira Gatens “maintain[s] that George Eliot’s own preference for ‘the experimental method’ is what drives the ethical realism which arguably received its highest form in her fictional works” (“Philosophy,” 214). Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi’s essay on “Gender and the Woman Question” makes realism a central component of Eliot’s take on those issues. For Hadjiafxendi, the “commitment to a realist aesthetic based on capturing the slow, organic unfolding of the everyday arguably works against the portrayal of grand, revolutionary gestures that might take forward the Woman Question” (143). As Hadjiafxendi indicates, realism works well for representing social determinism; the fates of Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke are cases in point. But realism also underlies Eliot’s interest in sympathy, and it is sympathy that grounds Eliot’s “attempt to overcome the gendered dichotomy between reason and emotion” (143). The tensions and complexities of this discussion of terms that are often already crystallized in Eliot studies — realism and sympathy — make it one of the most thought-provoking and insightful essays in the collection.

<8>Because of the short length and sheer number of the essays *George Eliot In Context* presents, marking out these thematic clusters rather than each individual essay will have to suffice as an introduction to the book. It should be noted, however, that while the variety of contexts is generally a refreshing and sustaining point of interest, it can be jarring to move from an essay like “Etiquette,” which makes very little substantive connection to Eliot’s work, to a rich topic like “Education.” Fortunately, this drawback is not weighty enough to take away from the productive reading the book offers. If Avrom Fleishmann’s *George Eliot’s Intellectual Life* (2010) is a sign of continuing interest in filling out the intellectual contexts around Eliot, then the particular form of this collection carves out a distinct contribution that invites newcomers, general Eliot enthusiasts, and Eliot critics alike.