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The Sybil and the Hyena: George Eliot's Wollstonecraftian Feminism

Because of the inarguable greatness of George Eliot's novels, her apparently lukewarm feminism has often distressed feminist scholars.¹ Her uncomfortable remarks on her preference for the company of men, her negative responses to efforts to enlist her in feminist organizations, even her fifty-pound donation to Girton College (which always reminds me a bit of the story of Queen Victoria's ten-pound donation to the Irish Famine Fund) all demonstrate caution toward radical redefinition of women's traditional roles. In the novels, Maggie Tulliver's falling for foppish Stephen Guest, Felix Holt's successful hero-mentor role toward Esther Lyon, and, most of all, Dorothea Brooke's housewifely fate in *Middlemarch* seem far from radical and possibly even inconsistent with Eliot's clearly demonstrated interest in advancing the status of women through improved education. Students also typically find these plot details troublesome, and the apparent inconsistencies are commonplace issues for classroom debate.

But in the mid-1970s, feminist attitudes toward Eliot shifted somewhat from the kind of distress expressed by Lee Edwards in 1972 over the *Middlemarch* finale (683-93) to approval of Eliot's articulation of women's struggles as expressed by Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* in 1979. Not only does Elaine Showalter's 1980 article point out that this shift seems to hinge on the character of Rosamond Vincy from *Middlemarch* (309), but approving articles like Zelda Austen's "Why Feminists Are Angry with George Eliot" and Kathleen Blake's "*Middlemarch* and the Woman Question" also grant Rosamond a squarer deal than critics traditionally allow her. Austen, Blake, and Gubar all see Rosamond more as victim of her education and of Lydgate's sexism than as a manifestation of lamentable deficiencies in Eliot's sense of sisterhood.

But the critical attention to Rosamond remains incomplete without a more precise understanding of this character's place in Eliot's feminist theory, a theory which, for all its difficulties and inconsistencies, is

largely explained by Eliot's reading of Mary Wollstonecraft's 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. As one of the few feminist tracts available to Eliot during her lifetime, as the topic of one of Eliot's critical essays and the impetus for another, as the source for arguments dramatized in nearly all Eliot's women characters, and as a book whose fate in the Victorian Age helped determine the low profile Eliot maintained in the women's movement, *The Rights of Woman* deserves more attention as a major key to an understanding of the problems of Eliot's feminism. Indeed so consistent are the connections between Eliot's work and *The Rights of Woman* that they help explain many of the problems—including the three trouble spots mentioned above—that have led to feminists' perceptions of Eliot as an awkward nineteenth-century puzzle piece rather than as a force in the development of feminism. Point for point, Eliot's novels illustrate Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments, possibly most importantly the argument relevant to Rosamond: that the education that society currently designs for girls ultimately produces not an angel in the house but an adulteress.

Eliot's written references to Wollstonecraft are often submerged, but they are consistent. Twice in her letters, when questioned about women's education, Eliot echoes Wollstonecraft's phrasing in *The Rights of Woman*. In her "Introduction" Wollstonecraft describes as the basis of her entire argument the notion that "truth must be common to all" (n.p.). When challenged by Emily Davies to contribute to the founding of Girton College in 1868, Eliot replies in words similar to Wollstonecraft's that women must have "opened to them the same store of acquired truth or belief as men have" (Haight, *Letters* 4:468). In 1869 she repeats the phrasing in a description of her strongest feminist conviction: "That women ought to have the same fund of truth placed within their reach as men have" (5:58). And two of Eliot's pivotal essays on women, "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" and "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," respond directly to Wollstonecraft's book whose ideas Eliot goes on to embody less directly but equally consistently in her novels.

Scholars have counted only a few of the many links between Wollstonecraft and Eliot. Ellen Moers juxtaposes Wollstonecraft's and Eliot's similar treatments of heroes and tomboys and their similar debts to Rousseau but does not define or elaborate on the relationship between the two writers and their works (17 and 130). Nina Auerbach notices their shared reservations about communities of women but again without mentioning the manifestations of these fears in Eliot's novels (23). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar place other nineteenth-century novelists (Jane Austen and Mary Shelley) in the Wollstonecraft

tradition: for Eliot they identify Harriet Beecher Stowe and Margaret Fuller as the significant literary relationship (532).

But Margaret Fuller supplies only half the topic for Eliot's most clearly feminist essays, "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft," written for the *Leader* in 1855. Nicholas McGuinn has carefully detailed the Wollstonecraftian feminism of this essay and concluded that Eliot "allows Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller to take responsibility for a feminist statement which is actually her own" (200). In this essay, Eliot especially praises Wollstonecraft's pleas for equal education for women and for more possibilities for women's jobs. In the "Silly Novels" essay written the following year she takes up yet another Wollstonecraftian point: that reading for and by women should be more realistic. Not only does this theme respond directly to Wollstonecraft's call for action in "Silly Novels," it also serves as a vital preliminary to Eliot's fiction.² The need for education, women's roles in the world of work, and the effects of women's reading touch all Eliot's women characters, most of whom struggle to find a place in a society that denies them the specific rights and opportunities called for by Wollstonecraft.

But it is the particular argument on which Wollstonecraft in *The Rights of Woman* and Eliot in her novels base their pleas for education that opens them to charges of elitism and hypocrisy: the argument that the consequence of educating women as accomplished distractions for a man's leisure hours is likely to be faithless wives. As Wollstonecraft puts it, "The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone. Will she then have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and cultivate her dormant faculties? or, is it not more rational to expect that she will try to please other men; and, in the emotions raised by the expectations of new conquests, endeavor to forget the mortification her love or pride has received?" (60-61).

This connection between education and adultery seems an especially odd theme for highly educated women like Wollstonecraft and Eliot, both of whom had, at the times they wrote the works mentioned above, survived attachments to married men that materialized despite the deep blue dye of their own stockings. In 1792, although Wollstonecraft had yet to live with Bruce Imlay or William Godwin, she had already found Henry Fuseli's wife most unamenable to the idea of Wollstonecraft's moving in with them (Wardle 38), and Eliot, in 1855, had had similar experiences with the wives of John Chapman and Robert Brabant (Haight, *Biography* 85 and 50). Thus Wollstonecraft in her

twenties and Eliot in her thirties had already ample life experience to contradict the notion that education thwarts adultery.

Both women, then, chose this theme less out of personal conviction than as part of their rhetorical strategies, for both women envisioned and appealed to a primarily male audience, indeed the only audience with the power to effect changes in education at the time. Anca Vlasopolos points out that "to an extent surprising for those of us primed to look upon *A Vindication* as a feminist manifesto, the book proves to be written for men" (463). Among the rhetorical strategies Vlasopolos attributes to Wollstonecraft are her appeals to male fears, especially to the fear of unchaste wives. There is evidence that Eliot, too, envisioned a male reader as audience for her feminist arguments. One of her letters (4:397) admits that she targeted a male audience for *Adam Bede*, a novel whose climax is precipitated by an act of sexual exploitation. In *Middlemarch* she phrases possible male responses to Dorothea's religiosity in the second person: "Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle horses" (7). In her 1865 review of William Lecky's *History of the Rise and Influence of Rationalism* she describes Lecky's audience as a "general reader" also cast as decidedly male (Pinney 397-414).

Eliot, moreover, at this point in her career, was still projecting a male persona. Susan Gubar has described her tone as perennially avuncular (466), and in the anonymous essays in particular, as well as in the early fiction when she was still concealing her identity, there is little suggestion that a woman is doing the writing. The offhand tone of "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft," for example, distances the persona from the topic, especially with its concluding sentence: "We have, perhaps, already claimed as much of the reader's attention as he will be willing to give to such desultory material" (206). The occasional male details attributed to the narrators of the early novels, as when the narrator of "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton" flips aside the tails to his coat, again suggest a male persona. If Wollstonecraft wrote as a woman writing to men (Vlasopolos 463), then Eliot goes a step further and writes man to men. Their improperly educated potential adulteresses are thus better seen as an appeal to male fears than as a product of hypocritical and/or condescending horror toward inferior, vain, and lascivious sisters.

As Ellen Moers has pointed out, all Eliot's novels concern adultery (155). And all Eliot's women characters suffer from pressure to gain accomplishments, the meager abilities to play a little soothing music and paint a pretty picture that Eliot describes almost scatologically in

Middlemarch as “small tinkling and smearing” (48). When Maggie steals Lucy’s beau, when Mrs. Transome has her affair with Jermyn, and when Rosamond goes after Will Ladislaw, they act out Wollstonecraft’s scenarios for accomplished and consequently adulterous women and embody Eliot’s pleas for education.

Several kinds of hit-or-miss education (including autodidacticism and male mentors) help intensify Maggie Tulliver’s emotional deprivation and consequently ripen her for an elopement with a Romantic hero. Her education indeed has included reading at least one of the books, *Gregory’s Legacy*, which Wollstonecraft attacks at length in *The Rights of Woman*. On the eve of the elopement, Maggie is fresh from the oppression of a job at a girls’ school, sighing after more accomplishments so that she might escape to a more elegant and better paying school. And Stephen fits neatly the Wollstonecraftian pattern for a man who might appeal to the vanity fostered by boarding-school notions of romantic love.

Readers’ complaints about Stephen have focused on the foppish gallantry that makes him an emotional lightweight, especially for a lover of Maggie’s. Stephen’s manners are those of the gallant who insults through a homage that trivializes its female object. Wollstonecraft dislikes the manners of the gallant: “I lament that women are systematically degraded by receiving the trivial attentions, which men think it manly to pay to the sex, when, in fact, they are insultingly supporting their own superiority” (97). When Stephen opens their acquaintance by offering her a compliment Maggie rebels against his gallantry, but as their secret love progresses she forgets her objections to his diminishing manners. When Stephen rushes to offer her a footstool she responds to his pseudo-servility with tenderness because, according to the narrator, she has been “compelled . . . in her girlish time to learn her life-lessons in very trivial language” (366). The narrator goes on to emphasize the repressive conditions of Maggie’s life at school: “To Maggie such things had not been everyday incidents, but were a new element in her life, and found her keen appetite for homage quite fresh” (366). The implication here that a decent education might allow Maggie to keep gallantry in perspective links her susceptibility to Stephen to her brain-numbing experience at school. Her time there has sharpened Maggie’s taste for attentions she accepts even though they depend on a supercilious gallantry she initially objects to.

Lucy is different. Her acceptance of Stephen’s gallantry is one of the points by which she fits Wollstonecraft’s model of the degraded woman: trivial, childish, and (as Wollstonecraft’s *Dedication* alludes to *Hamlet*) prone to “nickname God’s creatures” (35). The images of Eliot connects with Lucy—her fancy embroidery and her lapdogs

Minnie and Lolo—reinforce her triviality. Wollstonecraft's objections to the obligatory needlework expected of young Englishwomen who are "rigidly nailed to their chairs to twist lappets, and knot ribands" (125) appear in Lucy's incessant embroidering for the bazaar. Wollstonecraft also objects to ladies' lapdogs and recalls bitterly observing women who yawn at poetry and then require friends "to observe the pretty tricks of a lap-dog" (148). It is significant that Tom Tulliver, Lucy's sincere lover, performs the single romantic gesture of a lifetime when he replaces Lucy's dead little dog with a live one.

Tom himself also appears to owe some of his educational experiences to Wollstonecraft's descriptions of boys' schools which gain flesh in Eliot's portrayals of both Jacob's Academy and the King's Lorton school of Mr. Stelling. Wollstonecraft's fears of brutality among boy students seem justified by Tom's reports of fights with Spouncer. His designation of his master as "Old Goggles" bears out Wollstonecraft's suspicions that schoolboys spend most of their play time ridiculing their masters. Tom's vacation—what with his dead rabbits, the jam-puff argument with Maggie, and the rat-catching missed out on because of Bob Jaken's cheating—develop Wollstonecraft's fears that anticipating a vacation with the intensity of a schoolboy creates a good deal of stress. The general dissatisfaction with Jacob's Academy expressed by characters in *The Mill* would provide a vehemently negative answer to Wollstonecraft's culminating rhetorical question: "What boy ever recollected with pleasure the years he spent in close confinement at an academy near London?" (238).

But though Mr. Tulliver's dissatisfactions with Jacob's Academy echo Wollstonecraft's, his solution—to send Tom to boarding school—would please her no better, for Mr. Stelling and his establishment also occur in primitive form in *The Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft objects to boys' schools where grownups are the student's only companions, and Eliot emphasizes Tom's first-term loneliness at King's Lorton. Wollstonecraft dislikes the idea of an uncomfortable dinner hour with the master, and Tom dreads the simplest conversation at the Stelling table as a potential verbal trap. Both Wollstonecraft and Eliot connect clerical ambition and sloppy teaching. While Wollstonecraft points out of "pedantic tyrants" (240) that "a mitre often graces the brow of one of these diligent pastors" (242), Eliot presents Stelling as a greedy seeker of fame and money in the clerical game. Wollstonecraft's comment that "whilst schoolmasters are dependent on the caprice of parents, little exertion can be expected from them, more than is necessary to please ignorant people" (243), suggests Stelling's relationship with Mr. Tulliver who is charmed and impressed by the polished Oxonian.

One other Wollstonecraftian theme appears prominently in *The Mill*: the dependence of solitary women on their brothers. In *The Rights of Woman* the plight of superfluous sisters leads Wollstonecraft to speculate on such women's relationships with their brothers' wives: "The wife, a cold-hearted, narrow-minded woman, and this is not an unfair supposition; for the present mode of education does not tend to enlarge the heart any more than the understanding, is jealous of the little kindness which her husband shows to his relations; and her sensibility not rising to humanity, she is displeased at seeing the property of her children lavished on an helpless sister" (111). Mr. Tulliver's burdensome sister Gritty is one of Eliot's doubles for Maggie, and Mrs. Tulliver's attitude toward her is Wollstonecraftian: "It was natural that she should be keenly conscious of her superiority, even as the weakest Dodson over a husband's sister, who besides being poorly off, and inclined to 'hang on' her brother, had the good-natured submissiveness of a large, easy tempered, untidy, prolific woman" (139).

In *The Mill* Eliot's Wollstonecraftian themes extend from the rights of superfluous sisters to the necessity for educational reform. The Stephen-Lucy-Maggie triangle in particular gains clarity if considered as part of a Wollstonecraftian tradition. Lucy's affinities with Wollstonecraft's degraded childwoman model darken her character, while Stephen's Wollstonecraftian role as Romantic gallant accounts for his irresistible appeal to Maggie whose good taste had been undermined by her experience at girls' schools as both pupil and teacher. And these themes connecting education and adultery concern Eliot again in *Felix Holt*, especially in the character of Mrs. Transome whose sad plot fulfills Wollstonecraft's predictions for the fashionably educated woman who falls into adultery. Mrs. Transome's son Harold adds a dimension to Stephen's gallantry by assuming a Byronic Orientalism that Wollstonecraft uses extensively as a metaphor for sexism in *The Rights of Woman*.

Eliot's detailing of Mrs. Transome's education emphasizes its ephemeral utility and echoes Wollstonecraft's fears for accomplished women:

It is astonishing how effective this education appeared in a handsome girl, who sat supremely well on horseback, sang and played a little, painted small figures in water-colours, had a naughty sparkle in her eyes when she made a daring quotation, and an air of serious dignity when she recited something from her store of correct opinions. But however such a stock of ideas may be made to tell in elegant society, and during a few seasons in town, no amount of bloom and beauty can make them a perennial source of interest in things not personal: and the notion that what is true and, in general, good for mankind is stupid and drug-like is

not a safe theoretic basis in circumstances of temptation and difficulty. Mrs. Transome had been in her bloom before this century began, and in the long painful years since then what she had once regarded as her knowledge and accomplishments had become as valueless as old-fashioned stucco ornaments, of which the substance was never worth anything, while the form is no longer to the taste of any living mortal (30-31).

Having in her youth found herself married to a fool, Mrs. Transome has an affair with Matthew Jermyn, a lawyer who supervises her estate to his own profit. Her affair results in the bitterest anguish: the son she bears Jermyn grows up indifferent to her love. On his return from Turkey where he has made his fortune, Harold diminishes his mother into an ornament for the estate he can now run on his own terms and rejects her painfully when, in a melodramatic confrontation, he discovers his father. Mrs. Transome's misery confirms Wollstonecraft's expectations for miseducated young women.

Harold himself embodies Wollstonecraft's skepticism about the romantic Orientalism which was to gain popularity with Southey, Byron, and with Rosamond Vincy's favorite poet, Thomas Moore. In *The Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft calls the subordination of women "the true style of Mahometanism" (32). She suspects that John Milton's characterization of Eve is incomprehensible "unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls" (50). The accomplishments encouraged by women's education, she goes on, prepare a young woman only for a harem. Eliot leaves no doubt that Harold's time in Turkey has helped form his tastes for hot sauces and inferior women. In *The Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft writes, "Women appear to be suspended by destiny according to the vulgar tale of Mahomet's coffin; they have neither the unerring instinct of brutes, nor are allowed to fix the eye of reason on a perfect model" (69). Eliot's character Harold feels that "Western women were not to his taste: they showed a transition from the feebly animal to the thinking being which was simply troublesome. Harold preferred a slow-witted, large-eyed woman, silent and affectionate, with a load of black hair weighing much more heavily than her brains. He had seen no such woman in England, except one whom he had brought with him from the East" (350). Harold loses Esther Lyon, much to his surprise, when he confides to her that his first wife was bought at a slave bazaar. Dr. Lydgate of *Middlemarch*, who never carries things to the point at which he considers importing a concubine, nonetheless expresses his sexism in similarly Oriental terms. He looks forward to marrying Rosamond for bliss he sees as "the kind known in the Arabian Nights,

in which you are invited to step from the labour and discourt of the street into a paradise where nothing is expected of you" (257).

Just as Harold's mother acts out Wollstonecraft's post-adultery predictions in *Felix Holt*, Rosamond acts out the pre-adultery conditions in *Middlemarch*. The events leading up to Ladislaw's rejection of her advances form Rosamond's plot: the Wollstonecraftian plot of suiting oneself for no vocation other than pleasing a man and then practicing the achievement on other men when the first one gets dull. Rosamond's talents, education, and destiny correspond to Wollstonecraft's descriptions of women degraded by confinement and deprivation.

Miss Lemon's Academy has taught Rosamond "all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage" (71). When she is not dreaming of marriage to an aristocrat, Rosamond is "active in sketching her landscapes and marketcars and portraits of friends, in practicing her music . . . She found time also to read the best novels, and even the second best, and she knew much poetry by heart" (124). Like the model maiden of the courtesy books who so offended Wollstonecraft, Rosamond cultivates her style of dress: she wears gowns that "no dress-maker could look at . . . without emotion" (316). Like Lucy Deane, Rosamond often occupies herself with producing and repairing her frippery.

When Rosamond marries Lydgate the difficulties of the marriage spring from the impossibility of either partner's overcoming their educations. The couple's incompatibilities surface when Rosamond the bride begins to take a dislike to Dr. Lydgate's profession. Gradually it dawns on her "that women, even after marriage, might make conquests and enslave men" (319). Wollstonecraft suggests that finishing schools foster vanity and coquetry, and Eliot's narrator observes of Rosamond that "vanity, with a woman's whole mind and day to work in, can construct abundantly on slight hints, especially on such a hint as the possibility of indefinite conquests" (319). Wollstonecraft predicts that a woman educated to base her virtue on her reason will suit herself to nurture: she "will not neglect her children to practice the arts of coquetry" (n.p.). But in her eagerness to flirt with her new husband's dandy cousin, Rosamond neglects her infant before the child even gets born. Defying Lydgate's orders, she goes riding with the captain and miscarries as a result. Finally, like the wives Wollstonecraft describes as wishing "to be convinced by the homage of gallantry that they are cruelly neglected by their husbands" (61), Rosamond nurtures, not the babies that she might have had but only her attraction to her husband's friend Ladislaw. Dreaming of him as lover, she feels "that agreeable

titillation of vanity and sense of romantic drama which Lydgate's presence had no longer the magic to create" (551). Will's final brutal rejection of Rosamond's advances punishes and weakens her so that only Dorothea's loving energy can rescue the damaged flower of Miss Lemon's Academy.

Dorothea herself is the product of a different sort of flawed education from Rosamond's. As a young woman, Dorothea channels her ardor into a narrow yet sexually charged piety. Her religious school in Switzerland nurtures her devotion, illustrating Wollstonecraft's fear that women's "religion which consists in warming the affections and exalting the imagination is only the poetical part, and may afford the individual pleasure without rendering it a more moral being" (176). Like Rosamond's school, Dorothea's provides the wrong reading, not sentimental novels and courtesy books, but Pascal and devotional pamphlets. By the end of the novel Dorothea has replaced this reading with books on political economy, a taste that anticipates the sudden turn Eliot takes in the finale when she sends Will Ladislaw, who previously has barely hinted at such ambitions, into Parliament.

Will and Dorothea's political turn here at the end of the novel helps explain Dorothea's fate in Wollstonecraftian terms. As a wife and mother she fills the role Wollstonecraft seeks to advance, the nurturing role on which politics should not intrude: "Whatever tends to incapacitate the maternal character, takes a woman out of her sphere" (263). As *political* wife and mother, Dorothea can escape the triviality of Lucy and Rosamond: "*Littlenesses* would not degrade their character, if women were led to respect themselves, if political and moral subjects were open to them; and I will venture to affirm that this is the only way to make them properly attentive to their domestic duties" (253). Because Dorothea's fate unites her maternity and her taste for political economy it answers Wollstonecraft's call for women to fill political roles without compromising their nurturing roles.

Similarly, Eliot's reading of Wollstonecraft helps account for the confusing politics of *Felix Holt*. In the Felix-Esther part of this plot occurs a success unique in Eliot's novels. Whereas in *Middlemarch* Eliot demonstrates that lover-mentors make bad husbands, in *Felix Holt* Felix and Esther base their presumably happy marriage on the hierarchal conviction that Esther will always be Felix's pupil. Felix, as many readers note, is far from the radical the title of the novel promises; indeed, his politics are in the organic-conservative tradition of Edmund Burke. At the same time, the Transome Court part of the plot makes the Wollstonecraftian connection between Mrs. Transome's education and her adultery. Since Wollstonecraft wrote *The Rights of Woman* in response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in*

France, the collision between the two sets of ideas results in the disturbing inconsistency of *Felix Holt*. A novel whose themes echo Burke and Wollstonecraft in one breath is unlikely to present a coherent politics.

But perhaps *The Mill* is the most Wollstonecraftian of Eliot's novels just because it is most distinctly the novel of education. Maggie's desire to learn leads her to commit herself to the mentorhood of Philip, and her boarding-school susceptibility to gallantry readies her for the romance with Stephen. Since the education theme is Wollstonecraft's main thrust in *The Rights of Woman*, so Maggie is Eliot's most Wollstonecraftian protagonist. Her death is Eliot's most potent criticism of the education she will continue to attack through her creation of Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda*.

As for the validity of the Wollstonecraft-Eliot argument that education prevents adultery, it is, fortunately, beside the point, for although education is widely available to women in many countries today, adultery has not disappeared from those civilizations. More important to explaining the awkwardness of Eliot's literary and biographical relationship to feminism is the clarification of the three trouble spots through the Wollstonecraftianism that places her as a member of a tradition of feminist writers. Eliot's adaptation of the Wollstonecraftian rhetorical strategy of addressing an audience of frightened husbands also implies that society's fear and distaste toward unchaste women had not diminished during the sixty-five years separating the periods during which they wrote about women's education.

This stasis goes far toward explaining Eliot's low profile in nineteenth-century feminism, for prominent among the similarities between the two writers was their "unchasteness," and one of Eliot's advantages as successor lay in her knowledge of the sufferings experienced by Wollstonecraft when she violated society's sexual codes for women. Eliot mentions Wollstonecraft's suicide attempt—a result of her rejection by Imlay—as late as 1871 in a letter to Emmanuel Deutsch (5:160-61) and uses it as material in *Daniel Deronda* when she models Mirah's failed attempt on Wollstonecraft's preparations for her own drowning (Gubar 449). She was aware that even membership in a social circle like Wollstonecraft's that included publishers, writers, and free thinkers of many stripes could not do enough to reduce the social ostracism to a painless level. Moreover, Eliot could scarcely have read *The Rights of Woman* at a more crucial (and Wollstonecraftian) time in her life. Just back in England after her elopement with George Henry Lewes, she was experiencing constant humiliation and rejection for having pursued precisely the same course that Wollstonecraft had followed with Bruce Imlay and, for a time, with William

Godwin. Her own copy of *The Rights of Woman*, read just at this point in preparation for the *Leader* article, suggests how strongly she identified with Wollstonecraft as a fellow victim of society's wrath toward violators of its sexual codes for women. Among the passages she marked during her reading, for example, is one composed of Wollstonecraft's observations on the virgin/whore dichotomy. Objecting to a society that condemns seduced and abandoned victims to prostitution, Wollstonecraft argues that consequences in these cases surely do not reflect the victim's actual moral perdition, and Eliot underlined the passage that reads: "The human mind is built of nobler materials than to be thus easily corrupted; and with all their disadvantages of situation and education, women seldom become entirely abandoned till they are thrown into a state of desperation by the venomous rancour of their own sex" (382).³ With rejections from family, friends, friends' wives, and potential friends to be suffered through daily, Eliot chose not to share in the perfectly awful reputation of *The Rights of Woman* during the nineteenth century—which perceived it as "a manual for whores" (Gubar 569)—nor in the awful reputation of its writer (McGuinn 200). Consequently she carefully disassociated herself from her predecessor through concealing the source of her feminist theory and adopting the low feminist profile for which she is often criticized today.⁴

By the time Eliot's career as a novelist ended in the 1870s, events had confirmed the prudence of her choices. Not only was her reputation respectable to the point of canonization, but, for a combination of reasons having at least a little to do with the enormous popularity of the novels, the women's movement was also advancing. The Victorian audience was far more willing and able to accept arguments covertly embodied in highly moral novels by the sybil in the majestic black veil than the same arguments had they been overtly expressed by an avowed disciple of the Hyena in Petticoats who was nonetheless the author of their source.

NOTES

1. In the 1980 George Eliot issue of *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* Elaine Showalter summarizes the history of mixed feminist responses to George Eliot and her work in "The Greening of Sister George."
2. Thomas Pinney cites "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" as kernalizing the conflict between Rosamond Vincy and Dr. Lydgate in the "Introduction" to his collection of George Eliot's essays (8). The author's "George Eliot: Wollstonecraft's 'Judicious Person with Some Turn for Humour'" solidifies the connections between "Margaret Fuller and

- Mary Wollstonecraft" and "Silly Novels" as pivotal developments of Eliot's early theory of fiction which immediately preceded her writing of *Scenes from Clerical Life*.
3. Joseph Wiesenfarth in his "Introduction" to *A Writer's Notebook* rightly steers readers interested in Eliot's feminism to her own copy of *The Rights of Woman*, which is liberally and interestingly marked by Eliot herself. The book is part of the George Eliot/George Henry Lewes collection at Dr. Williams' Library in London, whose staff I would like to thank for the privilege of examining this and other volumes from the collection.
 4. George Levine also emphasizes Eliot's fears of being labelled a "fallen woman" (vii) in his biographical introduction to the Norton edition of *Felix Holt*.

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