

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Gender and Journalism: Women and/in the News in the Nineteenth Century

Guest Edited by F. Elizabeth Gray and Nikki Hessel

### Paratexts, Personae, and the Public

[\*Before George Eliot: Marian Evans and the Periodical Press\*](#). Fionnuala Dillane. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 270 pp.

Reviewed by [Susan David Bernstein](#), University of Wisconsin-Madison

<1>This remarkable and refreshing book challenges the conventional treatment of the early literary labors of Marian Evans in the 1850s as merely apprentice-work for George Eliot as a novelist of high Victorian literature. Instead, Fionnuala Dillane argues that Evans — as Dillane refers to the writer, and as I follow in this review — skillfully fashioned her published personae in line with the periodicals in which her work appeared. Even if we can trace some of the nuances of later narrators in, say, *Romola* (1862-3) or *Daniel Deronda* (1876) to the magazine voices of Evans's 1850s work, those periodical personae deserve attention in the print context in which they first appeared. The first three chapters explore, respectively, Evans as editor, as reviewer, and as serial fiction writer, to demonstrate that Evans crafted two-toned, hybrid voices for these periodicals, what Dillane construes as the “corporate” and the individual strands of the public personae Evans honed as both a product of periodical contexts and the self-conscious work of this creative writer. The last two chapters turn to how the periodical press constructed “George Eliot” and to Evans's pointed attack on this reductive and limiting celebrity treatment in her last book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1878). To study George Eliot “before George Eliot” means to invert the usual distribution of attention, to only mention in passing *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) or *Middlemarch* (1871-2), and to read in new ways what's usually in the background — the review essays, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), and *Impressions*. Why such concerted scrutiny about the role of the periodical industry in the professional making of the author known as George Eliot? By investigating Evans's writing through nineteenth-century periodicals, Dillane also illuminates “the formation of reading audiences, the emergence of the novel as a legitimate art form, the professionalization of writing as a respected career and the cultivation of literary celebrity” (20).

<2>The first chapter unpacks Evans's innovations as editor of *Westminster Review* from 1852 to 1854 while the owner and nominal editor John Chapman was busy with his bookselling business. Exploring the paratextual changes in the magazine during these two years, Dillane speculates how Evans devised a

new layout that provided organization of what other quarterlies had treated as hodgepodge “*Belles Lettres*” miscellany reviews or quick summaries. Instead, Evans provided structure with headings that emphasized national literatures; she also incorporated recto headlines, index details, and design changes to tables of content, all to appeal to the periodical’s audience. This kind of invisible (and often unpaid) labor, of course, was the lot of many women especially, and Dillane marks this role at the *Westminster Review* as “a development in Evans’s duplicitous engagement with her public as the invisible ‘character of Editress’” (24), a phrase Evans used in correspondence. This work, and its marginalization, is part of a larger thread on gender politics in Evans’s career that the book occasionally considers.

<3>In the second chapter, on “Marian Evans the journalist,” Dillane argues for “timeliness” (73), rather than an abstract timelessness, in reading Evans’s essays and reviews not as “pre-novel writings” (64) with importance only inasmuch as they offer clues to aesthetic theories evidenced in later work, but rather as situated periodical pieces. Dillane shows how Evans tailored her personae to appeal to three different audiences, from the radical Midlands paper, the *Coventry Herald and Observer*, where her first articles in print appeared, to the middle-class and liberal *Westminster Review* and to the radical, sometimes socialist *Leader*. For each journal, Evans crafted a “doubled voice” (76) straddling “the imaginative essayist and the newspaper journalist” (73). Dillane sees another advantage for this split-voicing: “the journalist provides a covert articulation of the embattled space she occupies between her responsibility to her own personal beliefs and the demands of the corporate medium through which such thoughts are given expression” (79-80). Noting the tendency by scholars to treat the journalism of writers including Dickens and Woolf “as less creative, less original and therefore less open to any aesthetic or formal analysis” (66), Dillane meticulously reads Evans’s periodical writing, especially “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), the essay that has been cited most frequently as the key to the George Eliot brand of realism. Rather than articulating a theory of the novel, as many scholars have asserted, “The Natural History of German Life” is, for Dillane, valuable for “the more subversive aspects of Evans’s take on mid-century journalistic conventions” (89) through her double-voicing.

<4>Dillane approaches Evans’s first fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life* serially published in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, by finding layered continuities between her fictional narrator’s voice and the hybrid personae of her essays. Even though Evans appropriates the periodical brand voice of “the *Blackwood’s* man” (103) in these stories, she also inflects them with ambiguity through “the contrast between the *Blackwood’s* overtones of her conservative and prescriptive male narrator and the story’s own questioning of this nostalgic, naturalized (and therefore more dangerous) voice” (122).

<5>The last two chapters analyze how the periodical press depicted “George Eliot” in the 1860s and 1870s, and how Evans criticized this very construction in her final book, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Dillane understands the double images of George Eliot the author in periodical reviews and essays as either the “embodied authenticity” (155) of the homespun Midlands narrator of the early novels from *Adam Bede* (1859) to *Silas Marner* (1861) or the disembodied, genderless, transcendent Sibyl or Sage, derived from her later novels. These conflicting images, Dillane argues, bespeak “an overt gender politics ... that derives from the problem of authority and authorization of the woman writer in the nineteenth century, a problem recognized by Evans the editor and periodical writer” (146). Drawing on

Judith Butler's gender theory, Dillane astutely recognizes that "'George Eliot' was a constant performance for which there was no original" (148). Whereas Charles Dickens managed to close the gap between public and private selves through public readings, advertisements, and authorized photographs, strategies available to him as a man and father, Evans did not enjoy these privileges as a woman, especially "the socially unacceptable Marian Evans" (151) living with a married man. Dillane concludes, "George Eliot is an idea on a page, not a person, and vitally, not a woman. And this George Eliot is of course as much a fiction as the country-dwelling Warwickshire nostalgic/realist. Importantly, both, in differing degrees, are the product of restrictive gender codes" (161). Although Dillane mentions Evans's aversion to photographs and to all visual images of herself, she does not discuss portraits or photographs, like one recently reproduced on the cover and another inside Nancy Henry's *The Life of George Eliot* (2012), nor does she consider the triptych of Dante, George Eliot, and Savonarola, likewise included in Henry's biography. Presumably the periodical press did not reproduce or refer to these images, but it would be interesting to explore how indeed they were made available or how Evans suppressed their circulation, given these two versions of George Eliot as provincial, ordinary, and masculine or as "author incarnate" and "transcendent prophet" (159).

<6>Dillane's concluding chapter shows how "Marian Evans takes on her audience" (166) in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, this much overlooked book that defies genre classification. In these 18 essays Evans returns to the form she used while editing and writing for the periodical press and implicitly undercuts the narrow ways in which this press construed "George Eliot." For Theophrastus Such is both a skewed concoction of the double views of the authentic and nostalgic voice from the provinces and the lofty and philosophical Sibyl, but also a negation of these personae through this transplanted, urban, and petty intellectual man who berates both the press and his readers. Dillane emphasizes the performative quality of Evans's voices, and especially the gendering and ungendering both by the writer and by the constructions of the writer in the press. Here too Dillane repeats her cautionary against plucking the content of these essays out of the broader context of form and sustained interest in the press and print readers. Only 3 of the 18 essays tend to receive scholarly attention, like the final one, "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!," usually read as the author's afterword on Jewish culture in *Daniel Deronda*. These few essays have been interpreted through author-centeredness, or only in relation to the biography of Marian Evans or the novels of George Eliot, a way of reading that *Impressions* deconstructs, something Dillane explores through her analytic sweep of many of these essays.

<7>*Before George Eliot* persuasively argues that Marian Evans was adept at all phases of her periodical work and that this ability to handle well paratextual design and journalistic personae does carry over to her astute consciousness about readers in and around her more celebrated fiction, although Dillane only hints at these connections to the novels given the center stage she gives to these texts less often discussed. Dillane's bracing case for "Marian Evans and the Periodical Press," the book's subtitle, might prompt comparisons with other women novelists who wrote for periodicals too, such as Margaret Oliphant and Mary Elizabeth Braddon. In any case, this book will make it more difficult for scholars to sideline these early and late publications in favor of the "major" novels.