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The Ironies of Widowhood: Displacement of Marriage in the Fiction of George Eliot

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I am master of you.

Romola (483)

He observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfill his most agreeable previsions of marriage.

Middlemarch (87)

She had been brought to accept him in spite of everything—brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while.

Daniel Deronda (365)

<1> Literary critics from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to Barbara Hardy to Allison Booth have observed that George Eliot's novels raise doubts about the desirability of matrimony; as discontented wives, *Romola*, *Dorothea*, and *Gwendolen* resist their husbands' objectification of them. This, however, does not tell the whole story. In *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot strategically ironizes each marriage by deliberately constructing a widowhood that surpasses the marriage in, at least, the promise of happiness and productivity. The renewed sense of agency of their widowed protagonists unsettles Victorian expectations. In the essay that follows, I will argue that George Eliot foregrounds widowhood instead of marriage in her three major novels, deploying a feminist irony that disrupts both cultural and literary idealizations and raises questions about assumptions regarding the configuration of irony in women's fiction.

<2> Eliot repeatedly writes from a feminist position as she exposes the desirability of marriage and the dread of widowhood. Set in Renaissance Florence, *Romola* features the intelligent daughter of the blind scholar, Bardo, who meets Tito, a stranger who ingratiates himself into her family. As he dupes the ignorant country girl, Tessa, into believing that they are married, he actually marries Romola. Their marriage is a nightmare. Death, however, intervenes. After Tito's father murders him, Romola nurses a village through pestilence, seeks out Tessa and her children, and supports them—financially and psychologically—for the rest of her life. Like Romola, *Dorothea Brooke* is devoted to learning, and frustrated with the limited scope of an unmarried woman's life. Just as Tito feigns good character, *Casaubon* exaggerates his scholarship. Upon marrying him, *Dorothea* despairs of happiness. But, as widow, *Dorothea* abandons her aversion for traditional domesticity and, to all appearances, finds happiness in her remarriage. Finally, the spirited *Gwendolen Harleth* vows not to marry and then recants in order to save her family from poverty. The marriage is a battleground between *Gwendolen's* will and *Grandcourt's* attempts to break it. *Grandcourt's* drowning, however, catalyzes *Gwendolen* to assume responsibility for her actions, as she changes not so much her way of life as her frame of mind.

<3> The demise of each husband releases the surviving spouse from his authoritarianism and, in varying kind and degree, from his abuse. Destabilizing matrimony, which is pivotal in her three most powerful works, places Eliot at odds with Victorian cultural assumptions. Joseph Allen Boone, however, has uncovered a "counter-tradition," in both structure and theme, to the Victorian marriage ending. Boone places the writer's gender in the background, as he discusses such diverse authors as James, Eliot, Melville, Woolf, and London, whereas I will treat gender difference as crucial to the endings of these novels. The strategy that George Eliot uses to obviate the criterion of marriage-as-ending is irony.⁽¹⁾ When Rachel Blau DuPlessis questions *Dorothea's* marriage to Will at the end of *Middlemarch*, calling it "contradictory" and a "discrepancy," she does not mention the ironies involved. Marianna Torgovnick's work more

aply describes the Finale of *Middlemarch*, as well as the endings of *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*: “The test [of the strength of an ending] is the honesty and appropriateness of the ending’s relationship to beginning and middle, not the degree of finality or resolution achieved . . .” (6). Torgovnick’s insights apply to Eliot’s characterization of widowhood by refocusing criteria on interpretive context rather than absolute closure.

<4> In women’s writing, irony has often been regarded as rhetorical glibness. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir states, in *The Second Sex*, that “we do not find in them [Austen, the Brontes, Eliot], for example, the ease of a Stendhal, nor his calm sincerity” (789). Boone himself refers to *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of “hilarious irony” and “the ironies of external circumstance” (92), discussing Austen’s irony in terms of conversational misunderstandings between the male and female protagonists. It is Toril Moi who formalizes the discussion of women writers’ use of irony when she observes that Patricia Meyer Spacks, in *The Female Imagination*, identifies Mary Ellmann’s “voice” as a writer with “wit” and “evasiveness” (23-24). Reflecting on that characterization, Moi wonders if Spacks disregards “the concept of irony [in Ellmann’s writing] perhaps because this has never been considered a specifically feminine mode” (36).

<5> More recent female critics continued the practice of not connecting women writers and irony. In her classic study, *English Romantic Irony*, Anne Mellor includes not one female writer among the male “giants” of Romantic literature on whom she focuses—Byron, Keats, Carlyle, and Coleridge. Mellor’s later work, *Romanticism & Gender*, mentions irony only occasionally, more often using the terms “sarcasm” (25) and “wit” (52) to describe works of female writers that are critical of the social order. Her most telling assessment occurs at the end of the summary of *Julia*, whose plot involves the death of a philandering husband and the improved life of the new widow: “[Helen Maria] Williams clearly implies that heterosexual passion may not contribute to domestic love; she firmly excludes it from her happy family” (48). Mellor sees no irony in such a move; she seems to attribute Williams’ conclusion to the familiar notion that married Victorian women found sexual passion unnecessary. And Elizabeth Fay, in her *Feminist Introduction to Romanticism*, associates Wordsworthian “sincerity” and Byronic “irony” with male authors while she ascribes “sympathy” to female writers (6). Using language similar to Mellor’s, Fay describes feminine rhetoric as “verbal play,” “gentle ridicule,” and “based on optimism,” rather than “pointed,” the term she uses for the ironic discourse of male writers (3). She identifies irony as a “mainstream” form, stating that women writers preferred the “literary form of the social critique” (4).

<6> Whether women writers are ironic or not is no longer a significant question; we know they are. The critical question embedded in the older one is why women writers have not been considered to be ironic and what that in itself reveals about irony used as a feminist strategy by George Eliot. What I call “feminist irony” rests on different assumptions from those that underlie irony in Jane Austen, for example. Scholars have already addressed that question. These three novels by Eliot, however, articulate a culturally constructed irony, as opposed to the textually located irony that Douglas Muecke has defined as verbal, situational, or dramatic (14).(2) Muecke’s thirty-year-old work, which has become the classic text on irony, lists forty-four “great writers” whose works are ironic, and not a woman among them (2-3). Five years later, in *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne Booth mentions Austen, Eliot, and Emily Dickinson only in passing. And Frank Stringfellow’s more recent psychoanalytic work on irony seems uncomfortable with the idea of irony in women’s writing, evaluating Austen’s irony as “obvious” and “at the simplest level” (8). Rather than dismiss these foundational studies, I would like to qualify them. The traditional works and categories only begin to plumb the depths of a feminist irony—“feminist” because it deconstructs the gendered behavior of both characters in and readers of texts, because it decenters masculinity in the texts and in the culture from which the texts emerge, and because it complicates female characters’ lives at the level of their material existence.(3)

<7> My reading of irony in Eliot’s most significant novels relies mainly on the work of feminist epistemologists. Kate Millett has said that men and women live in “two cultures” and that their life experiences are “utterly different” (42). While one does not want to overstate that case, philosopher Lorraine Code’s contribution is germane: “The sex of the knower is epistemologically significant to questions about credibility, power, ethics, aesthetics, judgments, and political response” (7). Thomas Nagel, moreover, reminds us that to disregard the element of sex is to risk positing “a view from nowhere” that would serve neither sex well. From that philosophical starting point, it is a small step to the claim that women use language and respond to it differently from men, that they represent as ironic different things from men, and that marriage and widowhood thus carry a semiotic burden in women’s writing different from that in

men's.

<8> Eliot's feminist irony factors marriage and widowhood into her discourse from an epistemologically different perspective from that of Victorian male authors. In traditional irony, the text treats the reader as conspirator (Furst 231); in feminist irony, however, the reader is less conspirator and more target of reform. Linda Hutcheon even identifies irony with "guerilla warfare" and, quoting Judith Butler, says that feminist theorists see irony as "[depriving] hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (32). For example, Eliot writes of the widowed Romola as being "glad to live . . . to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done" (650), as opposed to Thackeray's more predictable rhetoric in *Vanity Fair*, where prison metaphors define Amelia's widowhood:

Her life, begun not unprosperously, had come down to this—to a mean prison and a long, ignoble bondage. Little George visited her captivity sometimes, and consoled it with feeble gleams of encouragement. Russell Square was the boundary of her prison. She might walk thither occasionally, but was always back to sleep in her cell at night.(783)

Along similar lines, Dickens caricatures the widowed Mrs. Sparsit in *Hard Times*. In addition to her name, he depicts her in relation to her late husband, "of whom she was the relic" (50), as a bitter and nosy woman whose "business" it was to spy on the younger Louisa.

<9> Instead of using widowhood to unsettle Victorian cultural assumptions about gender and marriage, the two male writers repeat patriarchal expectations that marriage is a cultural palliative for and narrative resolution to womanhood, since women suffer emotionally and financially at the death of the spouse. As Code points out, in the proposition "S knows that p," the traditional epistemological focus is on the "knowing that," while the question "Who is S?" is considered irrelevant (1-2). Feminist epistemology, however, values the sex of the knower in order to "introduce . . . [a] moral-political component into epistemology" (3). In explicating Millais' prototypical painting "[The Widow's Mite](#)," Christopher Wood refers to the Victorian widow as "a walking symbol of sorrow and bereavement" (109). Numerous paintings by Millais and his male contemporaries further testify to what became known as the "cult of widowhood."⁽⁴⁾ In contrast to Thackeray, Dickens, and Millais, Eliot writes from the perspective that widowed characters could live happy and productive lives.

<10> Eliot first reconstructs the actual situation of wife and widow in Victorian England, only to blur the contrast between them. The historical record supports this claim. Mid-century legislation further increased the desirability of the married state for women (Branca, *Women* 72). Indeed, the data from nineteenth-century marriage rolls show that, between 1850 and 1852, 859 out of 1000 English women married before the age of 50 (Branca, *Silent* 3). Widows, however, occupied a complex position in the network of Victorian society, making up a greater percentage of the population than they do now. 12% of women over 20 were widows in the second half of the nineteenth century (Drabble 29-31). Even though the economics of death took its toll on Victorian women's lives in particular ways—mourning required special clothing for women, a woman who remarried was often expected to wear a black wedding dress to prove her love for her deceased husband (Curl 9)—widows often did not remarry.

<11> Despite the prevalence of marriage in the dominant culture, Eliot's writing, along with that of others, suggests that legal changes did not actually improve the lives of married women. Eliot, however, encodes her feminist politics in the narrative implications of *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*, attributing agency to her female characters and using irony as a deliberate strategy to do so. Refusing either extreme of idealization or caricature, as male writers and artists felt compelled to do, Eliot instead configures an empowered widow as an ironic counterbalance to the idealization of the married woman. Thus, her three major novels are packed with scenes that illustrate not the opposition of widowhood to marriage but its nuanced apposition to it. In the Eliot *oeuvre*, the author often uses widowhood to explain and prod the ideal of marriage, and marriage to negate many of the undesirable characteristics ascribed to widowhood.

<12> A close reading of the union of Romola and Tito supports these assertions. Early in her depiction of the marriage, Eliot metamorphoses the formerly "proud," "queenly" (94), and "majestic" (104) Romola into someone "urged to doubt herself the more by the necessity of interpreting her disappointment in her life with Tito so as to satisfy at once her love and her pride" (309). Romola overly scrutinizes herself for having spent too much time with her father

price (307). Romola even scrutinizes herself for having spent too much time with her father (308), “being sometimes a little too sad or too urgent,” “[being] a little too critical or coldly silent,” “[being] a little too hasty” (313), even for sitting in a room of the house that Tito dislikes (349). Eliot tells us that “Romola was labouring, as a loving woman must, to subdue her nature to her husband’s” (313). After Romola’s father’s death, however, Tito sells the scholar’s library without telling Romola, saying that “the event is irrevocable, the library is sold, and you are my wife” (358). The declaration, “You are my wife,” follows a succession of three clauses that are structured syllogistically, but represent Tito’s fallacious process of objectifying Romola, narrated by Eliot in such a way as to recall Code’s assertion that “knowledge is a construct that bears the marks of its constructors” (55). Eliot, as a female knower, manipulates Tito’s rhetoric of commerce in such a way as to reduce Romola to the level of inanimate books and busts, and constructs the deterioration of the relationship in a manner that sets up Tito’s perverse logic.

<13> Eliot ironizes the text even before the death of the husband. At the same time that Tito “wish[es] that his wife should be thoroughly reconciled to him” (372), Romola resolves that she “cannot be subject to him” (391), asks “how an instructed woman could support herself” (393), and writes that “the Romola you married can never return” (398). The simultaneity of Tito’s and Romola’s cognitive processes is Eliot’s subversive marker of male and female differing perspectives on power; she deconstructs Tito’s patriarchal authority as she constructs feminist resistance in Romola. Since he cannot have from Romola what he wishes, “tenderness” (472), Tito toughens his marital demands: “I am master of you” (483). Doubly burdened by its Victorian authorship and its Renaissance context, Romola’s response reflects a self struggling to regain agency in defiance of the political odds: “I too am a human being. I have a soul of my own that abhors your actions. Our union is a pretence—as if a perpetual lie could be a sacred marriage. . . . I desire to quit you” (567-8). Eliot has all but erased Tito from the text of the marriage.

<14> After Tito is murdered by his own father, Eliot’s presentation of Romola’s behavior, counter to her actions during her marriage, ironically signifies not mourning but rebirth, or at least renewal, of the sense of self that her marriage has eroded. The widow nurses a village through pestilence, “glad to live . . . to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done” (650). She searches for Tessa and the children:

She needed something that she was bound specially to care for; she yearned to clasp the children and to make them love her. This at least would be some sweet result, for others as well as herself, from all her past sorrow.(656)

Eliot ironically empowers the widowed Romola at the very time that, according to cultural as well as narratorial convention, she should be representing her as bereft, as do her male counterparts. Romola, searching for the very things that Tito during his life had hidden from her, never reveals her identity to Tessa. Eliot’s depiction of Romola as widow—contrasted with Mrs. Sparsit, Amelia Sedley, Queen Victoria, and even some of Eliot’s own minor widowed characters—underscores the radical limning of the widowed Romola.

<15> *Romola* concludes with an ironic force that Eliot articulates in the death of the husband, signifying an independence that Romola achieves not as a wife but as a widow and as a member of a community. Written against Florence’s historical struggle for independence from the Medici, *Romola* tells the parallel story of a woman’s attempt to break free from her husband’s domination. Both narratives are political. Having associated Romola during her marriage with images of “marble” (93) and “majesty” (144), Eliot depicts her widowhood in more flexible terms of “plasticity” (673) and surrounds her with children and the elderly, all of whom depend on her psychic strength and economic support, in almost bucolic scenes.

<16> *Romola* ends with neither the conventional marriage nor the dramatic death of the spouse; it closes with an account of the widowed protagonist’s moral and financial independence. While Laura Brodie is correct to point out that Jane Austen’s widows “reaffirm the marriage plot” and “coexist [with wives] at the end” (716-7), thus lending new respectability to widowhood, George Eliot’s widowed Romola makes a more trenchantly feminist, because deeply ironic, statement about marriage through her construction of a productive widowhood.

<17> Eliot’s irony, moreover, goes more deeply than presenting the physically blind scholar who sees into the wisdom of things; it demythologizes the assumptions of Victorian (as well as Renaissance) culture regarding womanhood and marriage and the way they are depicted in fiction. Romola more than survives Tito’s death; she regains agency and thrives from it. As a widow, she performs physical work that benefits both herself and others. acts with

uncharacteristic gentleness, and surrounds herself with the very people she would be justified in ignoring. Eliot thwarts readerly expectations through a feminist, and more to my point, ironic perspective in this and in her other two novels that feature widows.

<18> Dorothea Brooke parallels Romola Bardi along several lines. Both their devotion to scholarship and their frustration with the powerlessness of women—in Renaissance Italy as well as in Victorian England—link them across centuries. Their ill-fated marriages reinforce the comparison; each marries a man who is other than he seems. While Tito feigns good character, Casaubon exaggerates his scholarship. Helene Cixous' assertion applies to both: "Phallogocentrism is the enemy. Of *everyone*. Men stand to lose by it, differently but as seriously as women" (*La Jeune Née*, 96). Casaubon embodies phallogocentrism as he denies meaningful agency to Dorothea, who literally begs to "write to his dictation" (232). Eliot represents his inimical refusal in the face of his young wife's authentic request to "be of some use to [him]" (234). Not only is Casaubon's adversarial stance reminiscent of Tito's, but his loss of a potentially successful marriage in exchange for absolute authority over his objectified bride strengthens the affinity between them.

<19> The more Eliot represents the marriage in *Middlemarch* as either/or—either Dorothea renounce all agency in order to live out a compromised married life or wage continual war against her loss of power—the more graphic her problematization of Victorian marriage and, eventually, widowhood. At the same time that Casaubon answers Dorothea's plea for work with what the narrator calls "a tone of dismissal" (228), Dorothea realizes that she has idealized marriage in a "wild illusion" (243). In expressing Dorothea's marital situation as a metaphorical tomb, Eliot illuminates the gap between the Victorian ideal and Dorothea's reality: "Now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labour producing what would never see the light" (516). Through this denigration, Eliot has reconfigured gender. Instead of privileging the generative properties of married women, she recasts traditional female accomplishments—husband, children, home—in terms of death and darkness, associating physical fertility with intellectual barrenness.

<20> At her husband's death, Dorothea violates the terms of his will—that she attend to his unfinished work and avoid Ladislaw. In his discussion of that document, Paul Milton follows the lead of many critics as he notes that it "prompts the very things it sought to prevent" (64), stopping short of identifying Eliot's narratological move as ironic, while D.A. Miller writes of Dorothea's "eccentricities" (120). When Dorothea sees Will soon after becoming a widow, she tells him that she "used to despise [married] women a little for not shaping their lives more" (589). At Will's proposal of marriage, however, the widowed Dorothea abruptly abandons her formerly monolithic view of married life, promising to "learn what everything costs" (870), an activity diametrically opposed to the austere life of a scholar she had pleaded that Casaubon allow her to lead. In another ironic reversal, when the heretofore unsuccessful Will becomes a Member of Parliament, the formerly driven Dorothea "[is] absorbed into the life of another . . . [and] only known in a certain circle as wife and mother" (894).

<21> Eliot's representation of Dorothea's widowhood signifies a defiance of the dead spouse whose confinement of her caused them both to "lose" in Cixous' sense of the word. Even so, critical response to both the widow's and the novel's "finale" has ranged from disapproval to dismay at Dorothea's leap in logic from "virtual" to "unvisited" tomb. Eliot's narrative all but collapses as her character exchanges fear of "labour that would never see the light" for the "hidden life" in the form of remarriage. It is entirely justifiable to ask why someone who resisted the confines of one marriage might choose to marry a second time, to reenter the "tomb" as it were. Eliot supplies a clue to the answer in the form of the epigram to Chapter 83, in which Dorothea agrees to marry Will, that recasts the crucial question of the remarriage. John Donne's lines set the tone for the ironies that emerge in the chapter: "For love all love of other sights controls, / And makes one little room, an everywhere" (863). The question becomes not why Dorothea Brooke remarries, but what marriage signifies to George Eliot.

<22> In *Middlemarch*, marriage equals vocation for its female protagonist. The narrator early on compares Dorothea's abjection at the gap between youthful ideal and marital reality to the difference between expecting a voyage out to sea and realizing that you are "exploring an enclosed basin" (228). Eliot can still make a feminist statement through Dorothea if one accepts the epistemological premise of the significance of the sex of the knower (Code). Eliot's ironic discourse first decenters masculinity, in the form of Casaubon's wealth and authoritarianism, then reconstitutes it in the character of an impoverished, but loving, Will.

<23> The lens of feminist epistemology enables us to view Eliot's irony in writing the remarriage: Dorothea, as widow, finds in her second marriage a husband who makes unsureness bearable, even desirable. As opposed to her previous marriage to someone who provided a materially secure, yet psychically stifling, place for her, Dorothea's remarriage to Will is loving and unburdened by the very closure that readers of *Middlemarch* find difficult not to demand from the text. It recalls Torgovnick's use of "honesty and appropriateness," rather than "degree of finality or resolution," as criteria for an ending (6). It does not answer every question, nor would we want it to, but it allows room for the ambivalence of an intelligent woman toward marriage, allowing Donne's "one little room" to become Dorothea's ironic "everywhere."

<24> Like Tito and Casaubon, Grandcourt situates Gwendolen in the object position rather than as an autonomous subject. In fact, Joseph Allen Boone refers to *Daniel Deronda* as a "radical critique of marital ideology" (186). Even before the marriage, Grandcourt derives pleasure from regarding his future wife as having been "brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena" (365), and she feels even then "as if she had consented to mount a chariot where another held the reins" (373). Eliot, in rhetoric that surpasses that of *Romola* and *Middlemarch* in its articulation of marriage as indignity, effectively decenters the masculine subject in *Daniel Deronda*. For, although Grandcourt would have been expected to exercise power over Gwendolen in a Victorian marriage, Eliot locates the source of that power in the realm of cruelty, thus exceeding the bounds of acceptable social practice. Code's dictum that "the sex of the knower is especially significant to questions" involving, among other things, power is once again germane in the passages that reveal both Grandcourt's and Gwendolen's simultaneous perspectives--her "kneeling like a horse" and his "[holding] the reins." Echoes of Tito's self-appellation of "master" and Casaubon's "tone of dismissal" can be found in Grandcourt's attempts to control Gwendolen. Eliot, however, deconstructs such gendered behavior as she strategically exposes both the depths of Grandcourt's abuse of Gwendolen and her perception of her husband as abuser in the equine metaphor for their marriage, embraced by both but from epistemologically different perspectives.

<25> After the wedding, Eliot complicates her character's life, interjecting the very real threat of poverty into Gwendolen's contemplation of alternatives to the "terrified silence" of her marriage:

After the intensest moments of secret hatred toward this husband who from the very first had cowed her, there always came back the spiritual pressure which made submissions inevitable. There was no effort at freedom that would not bring fresh and worse humiliation. Gwendolen could dare nothing except in impulsive action--least of all could she dare premeditatedly a vague future in which the only certain condition was indignity.(615)

Eliot represents Gwendolen's perspective on her marriage in terms of being "cowed," "submissi[ve]," and "humiliat[ed]," making the passage even more meaningful by its place in the narrative--immediately following Gwendolen's visit to her mother whose economic survival depends on her daughter's marriage. She surpasses the Victorian model of a woman's financial dependence on her husband, revealing the radical nature of Gwendolen's poverty and its function as motivating force not only for her marriage but also for her paralysis. She simply cannot leave. Parallels exist, too, with *Romola*'s and Dorothea's "premeditatedly" thwarted escapes. According to Sandra Harding, "Some [sex-gender system] is in place in every known society, where it functions to produce relations of power and powerlessness" (as quoted in Code 67-8). Eliot deftly shows, through the cognitive processes of her heroines, the cultural currency of masculine power in the Victorian marriage. Although Gwendolen would have been penniless after such a move, the same could not have been said of *Romola* and Dorothea, yet forces even more potent than money keep all three in subjection to their husbands.

<26> Eliot represents Grandcourt's drowning as the catalyst for Gwendolen's ironic behavior as widow. First, the heretofore arrogant Gwendolen confides her moral ambiguity to Deronda. She then expresses a desire to restore herself, along with her mother and sisters, to their former station in life, as Eliot tells us, "when everything was happiness about her, only she did not know it" (842). As female knower, the young Gwendolen lacked the capacity to view her unmarried state in terms of "happiness," for, as Kathryn Adelson states, "making knowledge is a political act" (as quoted in Code 267), and Gwendolen is all too aware of the financial degradation of an unmarried woman. Finally, she abandons her impulsiveness; the narcissism that had enraged her husband vanishes at his death. She confides in Deronda that she intends to become "one of the best of women, who make others glad that they were born" (882), a profoundly different view of widowhood from the "prisoners" and "relics" who survive their spouses in novels by male

Victorianists.

<27> Unlike Romola and Dorothea, the widowed Gwendolen does not so much change her way of life as she alters her moral disposition. In Book One of *Daniel Deronda*, aptly entitled “The Spoiled Child,” readers first glimpse Gwendolen gambling at a casino. They last hear of her in a letter to the newly wedded Mirah and Deronda in which she regrets that “I only thought of myself” (882). The conclusion of the novel ironizes Gwendolen’s thinking about marriage and suggests a future far different from her selfish past. Eliot has constructed the novel’s opening in such a way as to highlight the desperation of the female household: twice-widowed mother, marriageable daughter, four half-sisters, and two female servants. The young Gwendolen regards marriage as “social promotion” (68). Widowhood, however, places her in the subject position, and she assumes responsibility for her actions. As widow, she exercises the power, albeit over herself, that she never could as wife.

<28> Although George Eliot never wrote the novel that many contemporary feminists wish she had—about an unconventional woman, unmarried and unmoved by the world’s expectations—her works, when viewed in the context of Victorian cultural and narratorial norms, actually exceed feminist predilections. Her female characters educate themselves; they work as ministers and governesses; they support elderly parents; one even dies in a flood of social ostracism. I argue that *Romola*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* should be read for their embodiment of Eliot’s feminist irony, for, as a female knower, Eliot constructs characters who are female knowers themselves. Since irony destabilizes that which is fixed, in these novels about wives who flourish in widowhood rather than during marriage, Eliot subverts Victorian cultural assumptions about gender in such a way as to render, if not outright rejection of marriage, at least its reevaluation.

<29> It is appropriately ironic that this writer, often considered insufficiently feminist, has produced in her three most significant works female characters who erode the “naturalized” position of marriage, as well as recast “essentialist” ideas about widowhood, encouraging readers not to view either state as having a fixed value in their culture or in their lives. We are told by her biographer that, at the death of George Henry Lewes, the man Eliot called “my husband” for over twenty-five years, she remained in her room for a week, read and re-read *In Memoriam*, and uttered piercing screams that could be heard throughout the house (Haight 516). Her weight dropped to 103 pounds, and she did not leave the house for three months. She wrote to a friend, “My ever-lasting winter has set in” (518). George Eliot married John Cross, twenty years her junior, eighteen months later.(5)

Endnotes

(1)George Eliot, however, disputed her publisher’s “preference for a happy ending” for her 1861 *Mill on the Floss*. She wrote in a letter to him: “I am preparing myself for your last enmity on the ground of the tragedy in my third volume. But an unfortunate duck can only lay blue eggs, however much white ones may be in demand” (III, 264-65).(△)

(2)That women’s irony is culturally constructed does not rule out the cultural construction of men’s irony, but that is not the focus of this paper.(△)

(3)The irony of Eliot’s own untraditional domestic situation was not lost on her. She wrote in a letter: “Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically. Women who are satisfied with such ties do not act as I have done—they obtain what they desire and are still invited to dinner” (214).(△)

(4)Reflecting the growing mercantilism of the nation, Victorian undertakers, referred to as “ignorant pretenders” and “cold crooks” (Fritz 245), persuaded vulnerable widows to invest in expensive funerals. Coffins were made of oak and bronze; linen and silk were extravagantly used to dress the body (Curl 7). Believed to be the weaker sex, women did not customarily attend the funeral; instead, they remained at home, preparing a lavish funeral feast (Curl 12). Having been “spared” the ceremonial rigors, they were expected to shoulder the much heavier burden of cleaning and cooking.(△)

(5)I would like to thank Professor Lilian R. Furst, whose N.E.H. seminar, “Reading Ironies,” inspired this article.(△)

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