

The “Orbit” of the Feminine Critic: Gaskell and Eliot

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<1>“I am afraid a feminine critic must find but a limited orbit possible to her – but I should greatly like this piece of work if it would answer you.” Margaret Oliphant’s letter to John Blackwood in the spring of 1854 (*Blackwood Papers*) no doubt voiced the anxiety of many a would-be woman reviewer, that in the minds of editors at least, there might be certain subjects on which their competence could be questioned. Oliphant was proposing to write an article on John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys, based on new editions of their diaries. The article, “Evelyn and Pepys,” her second for the magazine, and demonstrating considerable knowledge of the Restoration period, was published in July 1854.

<2>In fact the range of subjects in Oliphant’s extensive career as a reviewer was fairly broad. She reviewed history, biography, travel, and art as well as contemporary literature. She was knowledgeable about European literature and culture, both of which figured in her choice of subjects. Religious memoirs, volumes of sermons, biographies of Scottish theologians, and books about Scottish missions routinely featured in her articles for *Blackwood’s*. Although none of her reviews were of political subjects, she was intensely interested in politics and current affairs. Where she did address political issues more directly was in the area of sexual politics and the so-called “Woman Question” (see Hamilton 97-101).

<3>Her anxiety about subjects inappropriate for the woman reviewer was directed towards her editor, not her potential readers. Anonymity remained entrenched in the reviewing of the 1850s. For most women reviewers their gender and by inference their competence was negotiated with editors at the outset. From an early point in the nineteenth century women had established themselves as serious reviewers of serious books. Sarah Austin and Harriet Grote were formidably learned contributors to the quarterly reviews. Harriet Martineau’s writing for the *Monthly Repository*, and Marian Evans’s for the *Westminster Review*, both heavyweight publications, left no doubt in the minds of their editors as to women’s ability to range across subjects which once might have been regarded as masculine preserves.

<4>The convention of anonymity in reviewing, as the traditional argument ran, offered opportunities but at the same time denied the public acknowledgement which came with a form of signature, whether initials, a pseudonym, or a soubriquet. This was the case for both male and female reviewers. Most reviewers managed to manipulate its conventions, or at least to work within them, sometimes to advantage.

<5>The place of journalism in the developing careers of women writers and their stratagems in adapting to the literary marketplace of the mid-nineteenth century are brought into sharp focus by the unexpected conjunction, in the summer of 1854, of two anonymous reviews of the same book by two major women novelists, one established and one in the making. Because of the book's subject the reviews also reveal much about the reviewers' perception of women's role in literary culture.

<6>In 1854 the French philosopher Victor Cousin contributed a series of articles on eminent French women of the seventeenth century to the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. They were subsequently republished as *Madame de Sablé: Études sur Les Femmes Illustres et la Société du XVIIe Siècle*. Elizabeth Gaskell used it as a "peg," as was the custom, on which she hung her article "Company Manners" in Dickens's two penny, family orientated weekly *Household Words* (20 May 1854). Coincidentally Marian Evans reviewed the same book in the mandarin quarterly *Westminster Review* for October 1854, her review, a discursive essay of more than twenty-five octavo pages entitled "Woman in France: Madame de Sablé."

<7>More than just an interesting coincidence, the two articles on Cousin's book were written at significant points in the reviewers' respective careers and are revealing of their authors in a number of ways. Both had recently encountered European intellectual life at first hand, an exposure which made a profound impression on them. The life and times of Madeleine de Souvré, Marquise de Sablé (1599-1678), a celebrated seventeenth-century Parisian salon hostess, struck a chord with both.

<8>Gaskell had been contributing to *Household Words* for four years. "I do honestly know that there is no living English writer whose aid I would desire to enlist, in preference to the authoress of Mary Barton (a book that most profoundly affected and impressed me)" Dickens had written flatteringly, prior to its launch in 1850 (Dickens, *Letters* 6: 22). It was to become a professional relationship which lasted nearly fifteen years. She alternated fiction – beginning with her story "Lizzie Leigh," which was serialized in the first number, and including the tales which comprised *Cranford* – with informal essays, often based on a recent book, but adapted to the interests and expectations of *Household Words* readers. The weekly was a so-called "hybrid" publication. The intended readership of the magazine in its two penny weekly format was the newly literate artisans of the large towns and cities. The nine penny monthly numbers with wrappers and the attractive twice yearly volumes were aimed at prosperous middle-class families. Gaskell proved herself adept at writing entertaining essays with a serious message, but without the formality of the traditional book review. She regarded anonymity as a decided advantage in this endeavour, as she later explained to the publisher George Smith: "That has been half the battle in H. W. No one knew that it was I that was saying this or that, so I felt to have free swing" (Gaskell, *Letters* 577).

<9>Dickens took a close interest in her stories, offering suggestions for the plots, and sometimes supplying the titles. He was less concerned with her non-fiction, probably because her essays did not fit with the magazine's radical social agenda. He usually wrote to her after publication to express his approval. As was his custom, she was paid slightly above the standard rate for the articles.

<10>In May of 1854, when she wrote “Company Manners,” Gaskell was poised for a second major success as a novelist, her relationship with Dickens at its most intense and productive. The article was to be her last contribution to *Household Words* before the serialization of *North and South*, which began on 2 September and which, because of the strains it imposed on her, would alter her relationship with its proprietor irrevocably.

<11>Reading Cousin’s book she warmed to its subject. She had begun to travel on the Continent, initially to Germany in 1841, and more recently, in the summer of 1853, she made her first visit to Paris, followed by a second, with her daughter Marianne, in January 1854. Like George Eliot and her partner G. H. Lewes, she was to make a habit of escaping to the Continent after completing a book, notably her trip to Italy in 1857 before publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, and an extensive tour in France in 1862 after finishing *Sylvia’s Lovers*. She travelled with one or more of her daughters, occasionally with her husband, eager to ensure that they too had an enjoyable time. Immensely sociable, she enjoyed visiting friends, and extending her network of acquaintances.

<12>Her recent exposure to contemporary Parisian literary and cultural life had been an exhilarating experience. Through her friends the Schwabes she was introduced and captivated by English-born Mary Clarke Mohl (1793-1883), one of the most celebrated women in Paris, and a nineteenth-century equivalent of the salon hostesses of the seventeenth century. The attraction was mutual, Madame Mohl pronouncing her “the most agreeable literary lady I have yet seen” (Uglow 348). The unconventional Mary Clarke had had an intimate but platonic friendship with the polyglot scholar Claude Fauriel. After his death she married the German orientalist Julius Mohl. They knew everyone in French political, scientific, and literary circles. Cousin was rumoured to have been one of her suitors. Guizot, Sainte Beuve, de Tocqueville, Renan, Hugo and Constant among others frequented the famous Friday evenings at their apartment at 120 Rue du Bac. Madame Mohl was credited with having revived the art of the salon in French cultural life. Some of this she had learned at the feet of Madame Récamier, the last of the great hostesses, in whose house she had lodged and about whom she later published a book, *Madame Récamier: with a Sketch of the History of Society in France* (1862). Gaskell was to help her publish an article on Récamier in Walter Bagehot’s *National Review* in April 1860.

<13>Gaskell no doubt saw Mary Mohl in Cousin’s portrait of Madame de Sablé. She was also acquiring an interest in seventeenth-century French history and literature, an interest which would become focussed in a projected life of Madame de Sévigné (Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné 1626-96), a celebrated intellectual and letter writer and contemporary of Madame de Sablé, on which Gaskell did extensive research in the early 1860s but never completed.

<14>“Company Manners” is a response to Cousin’s work, but also to Mary Clarke Mohl, who is the “French lady” frequently quoted, along with her husband, the “French gentleman.” Although not a formal book review, Gaskell’s essay has a serious point. Her real subject is the breath of fresh air brought by the French style of entertaining, as practiced by the Mohls and their circle, in contrast to the stuffy formality of English middle-class dinners and evening receptions. Gaskell makes it clear that she is writing about entertainment designed to promote serious conversation,

and notes ruefully how often, in her experience, excessive food and elaborate preparations have stifled all spontaneity and sparkle. Conscious of her intended readers of both the weekly and monthly issues, she tailors her material adroitly to what she assumes to be their interests and capabilities. She avoids quoting from the French, but playfully affects to wrestle with the translation of “tenir un salon.” “Receiving company” or “holding a drawing-room” won’t do. “Shall we call it the art of “Sabléing?” she suggests (*Works* 1: 296). She regales her readers with stories of formal dinners gone wrong, the tedium of guests trying to be witty or imparting unnecessary information, digestions ruined by anxious hosts who provide too many courses; “No wonder I am old before my time” (308) she reflects ruefully over one such experience. The French alternative is so much more stimulating. To be a good hostess one needs to have “touches of the gipsy,” as she puts it, to relish the impromptu and unexpected. Madame de Sablé had it, she suggests. Madame Mohl certainly did. As Jenny Uglow points out, Mary and Julius Mohl’s voices are heard in this article, as in several others written at the same time (Uglow 349-50). The “French lady” stresses the value of *not* inviting celebrities to one’s soirées:

‘Bah!’ said the lady. ‘Celebrities! what has one to do with them in society? As celebrities, they are simply bores. Because a man has discovered a planet, it does not follow that he can converse agreeably, even on his own subjects; often people are drained dry by one action or expression of their lives – drained dry for all the purposes of a ‘salon’. The writer of books, for instance, cannot afford to talk twenty pages for nothing, so he is either profoundly silent, or else he gives you the mere rinsings of his mind. (*Works* 1: 298)

<15>”Company Manners” is a tribute to Mary Mohl, by her new friend, in the flattering echoes of her conversations and the detailed descriptions of her Friday salons. Her influence on Elizabeth Gaskell was to continue until the end of the latter’s life. As Uglow points out, three women were to influence Gaskell’s thinking about women’s role in society, “the clash of independence and domesticity, the quest for purpose and the need for love” (343): Charlotte Brontë, whom she had already met, now Mary Mohl. Through the latter she would meet the third, Florence Nightingale.

<16>”Company Manners” is a review of Cousin’s work, but cast as an essay about entertaining. Gaskell’s French was sufficiently fluent to make the task agreeable, and she had a grasp of the historical period. She slips in information about Madame de Sablé’s contemporaries, Madame de Rambouillet and other salon hostesses. She notes Cousin’s earlier book about de Sablé’s friend, the Duchesse de Longueville published in 1853, and Molière’s well known ridicule of the salons (295). Gaskell could write straightforward book reviews, though, professional journalist that she was, she knew what would suit the readers of *Household Words* and she adapted her material accordingly.

<17>Marian Evans’s response to Cousin’s book was cast in the mode of reviews in the quarterlies – expansive essays which used a book or a series of books as a focus. For the previous three years she had been the *de facto* editor of the *Westminster*, working with its proprietor John Chapman. In August of 1854 she was in Weimar with George Henry Lewes, at the beginning of what was part honeymoon, part working holiday, when she received a letter from Chapman inviting her to review Cousin’s book. A practical reason for the trip was to gather

material for Lewes's biography of Goethe. Marian was working on a translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and also translating material for Lewes. The gossip circulating in London following news of their elopement and the reactions of friends and immediate family had yet to reach them. Money was short and the invitation to review Cousin's book was welcome. She ordered the book immediately from a Weimar bookseller, planning to include a discussion of Sainte Beuve's *Portraits des Femmes* (1844) and Jules Michelet's *Les femmes de la revolution* (1854) in her article. In fact her review makes no direct reference to either. She finished reading Cousin on August 13, and sent the review to Chapman on September 8. He sent her a cheque for £15 in return.

<18>The money was important, but the book's subject was also intriguing, and it came at a propitious time. Both Lewes and Marian found social life on the Continent more open and relaxed than in England. In Weimar they were received hospitably by the local intelligentsia and officials surrounding the court. "No one here seems to find it at all scandalous that we should be together," she was later to write to Chapman (Eliot, *Letters* 8: 124). The person who most impressed her was Liszt. She had extensive conversations with him, in French (her spoken German at the time was hesitant) and memorably she heard him play. "For the first time in my life I beheld real inspiration," she recorded in her journal (Eliot, *Journals* 21). Liszt was living openly with the Polish-born Princess Carolyn Sayn-Wittgenstein, the wife of a Russian aristocrat, who showed Marian a number of kindnesses. To the future George Eliot Weimar was both "liberated and liberating" as Margaret Harris, co-editor of Eliot's journals comments (Harris, "What George Eliot" 7).

<19>Reading Cousin's book during her first month in Weimar, and in a period of intense personal happiness, Marian Evans responded intently to its picture of seventeenth-century French intellectual life and to the role of women in that life. She begins the essay with an unflattering reflection on the imitative quality of English writing by women: "With a few remarkable exceptions, our own feminine literature is made up of books which could have been better written by men, books which have the same relation to literature in general, as academic prize poems have to poetry: when not a feeble imitation, they are usually an absurd exaggeration of the masculine style, like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male attire" ("Woman" 8), in startling contrast to:

Those delightful women of France, who, from the beginning of the seventeenth to the close of the eighteenth century, formed some of the brightest threads in the web of political and literary history, wrote under circumstances which left the feminine character of their minds uncramped by timidity, and unstrained by mistaken effort. They were not trying to make a career for themselves; they thought little, in many cases not at all, of the public; they wrote letters to their lovers and friends, memoirs of their every-day lives, romances in which they gave portraits of their familiar acquaintances, and described the tragedy or comedy which was going on before their eyes. Always refined and graceful, often witty, sometimes judicious, they wrote what they saw, thought, and felt in their habitual language, without proposing any model to themselves, without any intention to prove that women could write as well as men, without affecting many views or suppressing womanly ones. (9)

In France alone, she continued, “Woman has had a vital influence in the development of literature, in France alone the mind of woman has passed like an electric current through the language, making crisp and definite what is elsewhere heavy and blurred, in France alone, if the writings of women were swept away, a serious gap would be made in the national history” (9).

<20>She then reflects on reasons for this. One possibility is physiological. The small brain and vivacious temperament of the Gallic race are more conducive to intellectual creativity than the larger brain and slower temperament of the English and Germans. A secondary cause of this achievement, she suggests tentatively, was “the laxity of opinion and practice with regard to the marriage-tie” (11). “It is undeniable, that unions formed in the maturity of thought and feeling, and grounded only on inherent fitness and mutual attraction, tended to bring women into more intelligent sympathy with men, and to heighten and complicate their share in the political drama” (11). As biographers have noted, this was an allusion to the union into which she had just entered herself.

<21>But the main source of “feminine culture and development” in France during this period was the influence of the salons, where men and women mingled freely, conversed as equals on all subjects, not just literature, but war, politics, religion, and daily events. Madame de Sablé’s forte was not that she wrote herself, but that she stimulated others to write, Pascal and La Rochefoucauld among them. The “absence of originality made her all the more receptive towards the originality of others” (30). She was “not a genius, not a heroine, but a woman whom men could more than love – whom they could make their friend, confidante, and counsellor; the sharer, not of their joys and sorrows only, but of their ideas and aims” (36). Eliot contrasts Madame de Sablé with the women in high society during the equivalent period in England, the reigns of James I, Charles I, and Charles II, and then brings her discussion to the present day. The “superiority of womanly development” in France is not only of historical interest, it has a bearing “on the culture of women in the present day”:

Women became superior in France by being admitted to a common fund of ideas, to common objects of interest with men, and this must ever be the essential condition at once of true womanly culture and of true social well-being. . . . Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man, and then that which is peculiar in her mental modification, instead of being, as it is now, a source of discord and repulsion between the sexes, will be found to be a necessary complement to the truth and beauty of life. Then we shall have that marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of human happiness. (36-7)

The lyrical ending to her review is no doubt linked to the period in her own life in which it was written. But it is also related to her predicament, as often the sole woman in the *Westminster Review* and Chapman circles, surrounded entirely by intellectually able, even brilliant men, but with no female companionship. Weimar had begun to introduce other possibilities in society. Reading Cousin had persuaded her that circumstances had always been different in France, even in the present century, beginning with Madame de Stael, and followed by George Sand and their contemporaries. In her reflections on women’s role in intellectual and cultural life, the perceived need for a recognized equality with men, and the crippling effect of imitation or feigned

masculinity, there are anticipations of her better known essay, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," published in the *Westminster* in 1856.

<22>As in all her *Westminster* articles, Marian Evans is writing for well-educated, mainly male readers. The longer quotations from Cousin are in English, but they are interspersed with shorter ones in French, the assumption being that this will pose no difficulty for her audience. Reflecting on the demise of the salon, the product of a closed cultural coterie, she sees the modern, ever-widening public now served by journalism, rather than conversation:

As the old coach-roads have sunk into disuse through the creation of railways, so journalism tends more and more to divert information from the channel of conversation into the channel of the Press: no one is satisfied with a more circumscribed audience than that very indeterminate abstraction, 'the public' and men find a vent for their opinions not in talk, but in 'copy.' (15-16)

She wittily suggests that if technological changes continue, further development of the electric telegraph could "reduce us to a society of mutes" (16). Writing of Madame de Sablé's attempt to insert a notice of La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes* into the *Journal des Savants* only to have La Rochefoucauld edit out her negative comments, she adds, "In some points we see the youth of journalism was not without promise of its future" (33).

<25>Eliot wrote a second article for the *Westminster*, "Memoirs of the Court of Austria" (April 1855) during the next phase of their travels, in Berlin. Contributions to the "Belles-lettres" section of "Contemporary Literature" followed in the July and October 1855 numbers, all published after their return to England. At Lewes's instigation, possibly the earliest example of his conducting professional negotiations on her behalf, she wrote two pot-boiling articles for *Fraser's Magazine* adapted from her journal entry "Recollections of Weimar," "Three Months in Weimar" (June 1855) and "Liszt, Wagner and Weimar" (July 1855). But of all the journalism written in 1854-5 her essay "Woman in France" stands out, the product of a period of personal fulfilment, a reflection on the role of women in the wider world of literary, political, and scientific culture, and part of her self-conscious preparation for her future novel-writing career.

<26>In 1854 Marian Evans's career as a journalist was moving into its second, and more intensive period. She had been the unacknowledged and largely unpaid editor of the *Westminster Review* since the end of 1851, reviewing occasionally but mainly spending her time on "article reading and scrapwork of all sorts" (*Letters* 2: 31). She also reviewed for the weekly *Leader*, which Lewes co-founded in 1850 with Thornton Hunt, and of which he was literary editor. The amount of reviewing for both the *Leader* and the *Westminster* accelerated in 1855 and 1856. She wrote more than thirty reviews for the latter in that period as well as the two articles in *Fraser's*. She also wrote four reviews for the new weekly *Saturday Review*, to which Lewes also contributed, in 1855.

<27>Anonymity definitely provided opportunities in Eliot's case. She was able to review the same book more than once. She reviewed Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* for the *Leader* (19 May 1855) and for the *Westminster* in July of the same year (Rignall 180). Less impartially she was

able to review Lewes's *Life of Goethe* in the *Leader* in 1855, the book which she had helped to research the previous year.

<28>The reviewing in 1855-6 provided a welcome income but the brisk journalistic pace was not to last. In January 1857 the serialization of her *Scenes of Clerical Life* began in *Blackwood's Magazine*. In the same month the last of her "Belles Lettres" sections appeared in the *Westminster*. *Adam Bede*, published in three volumes in 1859, was an immediate critical success. Once her career as a writer of fiction was assured, as is well known, her reviewing tailed off. Those engagements she agreed to were very much shaped by Lewes's interests. When he became an advisor to George Smith's new *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1865 she wrote four articles between March and May 1865. When he became editor of the *Fortnightly* in the same year she wrote two reviews for the first number. John Blackwood persuaded her to write the "Address to Working men, by Felix Holt" published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in January 1868. It was to be her last contribution to a periodical.

<29>Elizabeth Gaskell's career, already established at the point that George Eliot's was in its infancy, followed a different pattern. She did not have Eliot's single mindedness when it came to the writing of fiction. Rather she saw her contributions to periodicals, whether articles or stories, as part of the texture of her writing life, along with her full-length novels and the biography of Brontë. She resumed her writing for *Household Words*, despite her impulsive declaration, "I will never write for H. W. again," following the tensions surrounding the serialization of *North and South* (*Further Letters* 123). She continued to write for its successor, *All the Year Round*, until the end of 1863. George Smith, who had been Charlotte Brontë's mentor and publisher, and who published her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* persuaded her to contribute to his *Cornhill Magazine*. Through her Christian Socialist contacts she became part of the circle involved in *Macmillan's Magazine* and the weekly *Reader*. Her old acquaintance J. A. Froude, whom she first met in the Lake District when he was a tutor to the family of some her friends, persuaded her to write for *Fraser's Magazine* when he took on the editorship in 1860.

<30>Gaskell is not usually associated with book reviewing. In fact she wrote at least two reviews for the *Athenaeum*, and possibly more (*Works* 1: 207). She wrote an informed and compelling endorsement of W. M. T. Torrens's *Lancashire's Lesson* (1862) in the *Reader* (25 March 1865) which put the case for the institution of public works in times of economic hardship (*Works* 1: 411-18). The same arguments that she had put indirectly in *Mary Barton* and *North and South* – the importance of upholding the dignity of workers, and the responsibility of employers and the governing classes in times of hardship – were reiterated more formally in this cogent review, which drew on her personal involvement in the relief of distress among Lancashire mill workers as the result of the American Civil War. All of her formal book reviews were anonymous. None give any clues, in terms of their style, as to their authorship.

<31>Her articles for *Macmillan's* and for *Fraser's* tackled serious subjects although not in the form of book reviews. In these, a recognizable Gaskellian style is detectable. An obituary article for *Macmillan's* (December 1863) on the Civil War hero Robert Gould Shaw who fought on the Northern side in command of the first black regiment was written in light of the magazine's support for the north in the conflict. A series of articles on "French Life" (April-June 1864) that

is part autobiography, part travel narrative, also demonstrated her knowledge of French history and literature.

<32>The extent of Gaskell's periodical writings, including her book reviewing, is not fully known, even now. It is likely that she did more reviewing for the *Reader* – her name was listed in advertisements as a contributor on several occasions, and at her death. She probably wrote more for *Fraser's Magazine*. She may have contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the last year of her life.

<33>The texture of her writing life more closely resembles that of writers such as Dinah Craik and Margaret Oliphant than George Eliot's in its combination of reviewing and essay writing with fiction, although she did not produce anything like the quantity of either that the two younger women were to publish. In her resolve to eschew reviewing and article writing once her career as a novelist was launched, Eliot's writing life was the exception rather than the norm. But the careers of both women writers, along with those of Craik, Oliphant, and many more, contribute to a composite portrait of nineteenth-century women writers' engagement with and dependence on the press. In all these cases the "orbit of the feminine critic" can be seen to be wide ranging and ever expanding, by no means the limited one once feared by Margaret Oliphant.

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