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"[G]irlish Passion and Vanity":

Female Anger and Sympathy in George Eliot's Early Novels

Well received in their own times, George Eliot's early novels *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) already demonstrated the dedication to realist representations of human life that Eliot is still known for today. While her most pertinent focus is that this realism makes readers critically yet sympathetically consider the lives of common people, I argue that the sympathetic element itself is more multifaceted than its common descriptor "fellow feeling" would imply. In particular, Eliot portrays the experience of anger, and especially female anger, as a necessary element of her broader sympathetic feeling, not as its antithesis. By identifying and elucidating the ways in which Eliot describes how women both enact and receive anger and violence, we can also identify broader tensions present in Eliot's realist communities, not only between the people in them, but within individuals as well. Eliot's portrayal of women's anger aggregating to form yet also contending with larger narrative structures forces us to complicate and to reconsider the role of women's inner lives in relation to sympathy. In doing so, Eliot not only shifts the locus of sympathy and emotion in her own novels, but also in the real communities which her novels seek to represent and change.

Before we can identify sympathy's particular components in Eliot's early work, however, we must first identify the ways in which Eliot connects sympathy with a broader realist project.

One of her most immediately recognizable defenses of realist literature and sympathy is the chapter "In Which the Story Pauses a Little" from *Adam Bede*. Perhaps feeling the pressure of justifying her debut novel to the world, Eliot imagines a hypothetical critic beseeching her to make Mr. Irwine say "the most beautiful things" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 193) in response to Arthur's plight rather than the dissatisfying and (understandably) incomplete advice he actually gives. Not too fazed by the critic of her own imagination, Eliot retorts that "Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be . . . but it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 193). In this simple statement, Eliot puts forward a rather comprehensive realist view which argues that novels should be based on a real world, that they should represent real or possible events within that world, and also that such representations need not be true to life, only true to the impressions the novelist has of them. Although the third premise appears the contradict the first two, it actually provides one of the most necessary yet unintuitive criterion for sympathy to exist: a separation and conflict between the self and others.

As Elizabeth Ermarth explains in her article "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy," George Eliot's "particular view of sympathy, one that sometimes has eluded her modern critics, has little to do with benevolence" and instead emphasizes "true acts of sympathy that involve a difficult psychic negotiation between self and other" (Ermarth 23). By Eliot's own admission, there is a kind of irrevocable tension inherent to her narratives even at their most benign. Therefore, it is actually not at all surprising that Eliot's apparently quaint attraction to the

"monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, or tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 195) turns so easily into portraying actual instances of those very things, though on the scale of "these common coarse people, who have no picturesque sentimental wretchedness" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 196) rather than that of "heroes whom I shall never know except by hearsay" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 197). Again, Eliot argues that telling stories about everyday human lives is more important than sticking to some established canon not in spite of the fact that such stories rely on her individual viewpoint, but precisely because of that. In her early novels, where "difference necessarily precedes unity since what does not differ cannot be joined" (Ermarth 26), the fact that sympathetic viewpoints are necessarily conveyed through a constricted perspective is entirely the point. Such storytelling produces the very conflict and difference that makes readerly sympathy possible. Because "any constructive action must be preceded by the recognition or difference: between oneself and another, or between the differing impulse of one's one complex motivation" (Ermarth 26), we must look within the superficially idyllic communities that Eliot has created and draw out their divisions and conflicts in order to actually achieve that "fibre of sympathy" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 197) Eliot believes literature should produce in conjunction with, not in opposition to, conflict.

What Eliot recognizes in turn is that the clearest and quickest way to force this introspection is by making her characters conflict with the world she is also dedicated to representing. In particular, the ways in which Eliot integrates female anger and even violence in her novels tells us a great deal about how sympathy can and must form even in the most inhospitable of minds or texts. In his article "A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of

Community in George Eliot," Forest Pyle calls upon Jacqueline Rose's book *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986) to describe how Eliot's female characters, despite being aware of their own "dislocation" from their communities, are nonetheless subject to "what Jacqueline Rose . . . powerfully described as the 'spectacle of women' in George Eliot" (Pyle 8) such that "the disturbance of the feminine" becomes "bound into the very form of the narrative" (Pyle 8). The fact that individual feminine conflict is so interwoven into the narrative, a narrative dedicated to the difficulty of reckoning individual lives in terms of their own communities and in readers' eyes, means such conflicts necessarily become the novels' as well. Ironically, it follows that the anger of women, an anger often repressed or misdirected by the women experiencing it and by the text itself, is actually one of the most fruitful sources of sympathy in her early novels.

Although the breadth of female characters and all their likely frustrations and anger is too great to discuss in its entirety here, we need not look much further than *The Mill on the Floss*'s Maggie Tulliver and *Adam Bede*'s Hetty Sorrel to prove this point more thoroughly. Christopher Lane states in "George Eliot and Enmity" that "in many episodes in [Eliot's] work, hatred obliterates reparative compassion . . . because Eliot represents the former emotion in quasi-impersonal terms, as a force extending beyond individual and social control" (Lane 109). His most pertinent point for my discussion of Hetty and Maggie in particular is that "converting enmity into fellow-feeling requires more than faith, insight, or goodwill from Eliot's characters," instead requiring them to sacrifice not only their own self-interest but also their joy in another's harm (Lane 109). Maggie faces this problem very acutely, struggling between love for her family and wanting to escape their influence. The first time Tom lectures Maggie as the *de facto* head of the household after their father's ruin, Maggie feels "conflicting resentment and affection and a

certain awe . . . of Tom's firmer and more effective character" (Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* 246). When he reproaches her again, however, whatever admiration there had been converts to bitter, yet hidden, tears. Yet it is this moment when Maggie feels the need to silence her own anger that Eliot introduces quite an extended passage of free indirect discourse, not only amplifying Maggie's emotion but also loosening the division between Maggie and the text itself.

Tom's specific disdain turns into a broader sense that "everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind" and that "there was no indulgence, no fondness, such as she imagined when she fashioned the world afresh in her own thoughts" (Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* 247). Rather than settling into the "still, sad monotony" of her life, which "which threw her more than ever on her inward self" (Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* 287), Maggie perpetuates her despair and anger through Thomas a Kempis, deciding that "all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure" and that she must start "looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely guided whole" (Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* 302). In other words, she gives up nothing by becoming self-denying. Rather than leaving her misery or her anger behind, she carries these feelings with her and fits them into her new philosophy, so that there was "some pride and impetuosity even into her self-renunciation: her own life was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity" (Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* 305). In sustaining the rage she proposes to leave behind, Maggie conflicts with herself and with others, producing conditions necessary for sympathy.

Peggy Fitzhugh Johnstone argues in "Narcissistic Rage in *The Mill on the Floss*" that this kind of misdirected anger arises from "Maggie's unresolved childhood rage, which results from her sense that she is devalued by her family and society" (Fitzhugh Johnstone 43) and reemerges

when dealing with “any incident that attacks her already weak sense of self” (Fitzhugh Johnstone 45). This reading is easily supported given that Maggie, faced with losing her autonomy to an even greater extent now that Tom runs their household, moves from her childhood anger to another kind of passionate, self-righteousness in religion. When we refer back to the relationship Lane identified between sympathy and anger, Maggie’s attachment to religion turns out not to be the sacrifice of self-interest she believes it to be, but an emphasis of it. Maggie’s turn to religion becomes the struggle between the individual and the other that Eliot’s sympathy requires, where Maggie’s anger is validated rather than erased. As such, I find Fitzhugh Johnstone’s claim that “after the Thomas a Kempis incident, there is little mention of Maggie’s anger, and there are no accounts of overtly aggressive action on her part” and that Maggie has to act out her rage in romantic relationships instead (Fitzhugh Johnstone 48) an incomplete reading. As I have shown, Maggie’s anger does undergo a kind of transformation, but this transformation has to be purposeful and adverse to create sympathy, not “accidental” or “innocent” as Fitzhugh Johnstone argues it is. It certainly does not follow that “Eliot’s apparent inability to see her character’s aggression,” an inability which I argue does not exist, “seems to derive from her identification with her autobiographical heroine” (Fitzhugh Johnstone 43) that requires Eliot to idealize Maggie’s “struggles of conscience” (Fitzhugh Johnstone 48). If Eliot could not separate herself from her characters, could not recognize the very dissonance between minds that her sympathy requires to exist, how can we as readers even attempt to do so?

Fortunately, for both Eliot and for us readers, this threat of an improper association and identification between author and character, already weak in *The Mill on the Floss*, weakens further still when considering Hetty Sorrel of *Adam Bede*. Not only does *Adam Bede*’s narrator

possess much more decisive and present opinions about what they share throughout the novel, but the woman of interest, Hetty Sorrel, is decidedly non-autobiographical. This distance between narrator and character already produces a conflict within the text, a distance which the audience comes to share when learning the motivation for and nature of Hetty's actions. Finding little to no reprieve from her society or from her own narrator, Hetty Sorrel becomes the very model of a sympathetic figure. In "The History of an Unnatural Act: Infanticide and *Adam Bede*," Rosemary Gould identifies the almost prophetic nature of Hetty's trial by comparing it to that of one Mary Jones, whose trial was barely preceded by *Adam Bede*'s publication in 1859. Gould notes that "both women were considered by the Victorians to be victims of seduction. Both concealed their pregnancies . . . Both killed their children, but under circumstances that suggest, paradoxically, both premeditation and temporary insanity" (Gould 263). The differences lie in *Adam Bede*'s chronology, being set sixty years prior, and "that in Hetty's case both the penitence and the reprieve are brought about privately, rather than through public, official processes" (Gould 263). Gould argues that Eliot's treatment of Hetty is itself in conversation with other Victorians dealing with the perceived problem of infanticide, Victorians who face a tension between wanting to humanize the (once) mother yet see their very "existence as a problem, one that undermines . . . society" (Gould 264). Despite believing "that the idealization of women as children causes great harm," Eliot also seems to think that "this sentimental evaluation" is necessary "to create sympathy for Hetty, just as so many other Victorians did (Gould 264). However, as we soon see, Hetty being denied agency or a complex inner life does not make her innocent. As such, we are introduced to another source of seeming paradox and conflict: to make Hetty sympathetic, Eliot has to take that sympathy away.

She accomplishes this by sustaining an image of Hetty that contains the innocence of childhood as well as its petulance and anger, emotions that we've shown are far more productive in Eliot's worldview than might be imagined by her contemporaries or modern readers. Rereading Arthur's rejection, Hetty quickly judges that "it was worse – it was more cruel" than she had seen before, and "crush[ing] it up again in anger," decides that "she hated the writer of that letter – hated him for the very reason that she hung upon him with all her love – all the girlish passion and vanity that made up her love" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 364). Despite the strong reversal of Hetty's feelings, from passionate love to hate, there is no sense that Eliot's narrator actually disapproves of or even judges her because of it. Indeed, there is actually a justification given, a justification that lies in exploring Hetty's psyche rather than discrediting it. She hates strongly because she loves strongly, and loves strongly because of her "girlish passion and vanity," a reminder that, for all her faults, Hetty is still just a young girl dealing with greater forces of class, power, and gender than she herself can understand, even while readers rely on her to live through and interpret those same forces for them through sympathy. In addition, Arthur's claim that "You know nothing, dear Hetty, of the world in which I must always live, and you would soon begin to dislike me, because there would be so little in which we should be alike" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 362) directly contradicts Eliot's own conditions of sympathy, making it clear that it is, in part, Hetty's tempestuous nature and not Arthur's apparently rational (yet much too late) decision to leave which drives the novel towards its sympathetic conclusion.

As Deanna Kreisel identifies in "Incognito, Intervention, and Dismemberment in *Adam Bede*," Eliot uses Hetty as a narrative substitution for herself in order "to rehearse and ultimately resolve, through her character's banishment . . . the tensions inherent in her androgynous . . .

narratorial style" (Kreisel 570). Like Fitzhugh Johnstone, Kreisel identifies a connection between the societal and emotional tensions in Eliot's life with those of her female characters, especially those arising from her romantic relationships. Unlike Fitzhugh Johnstone, however, Kreisel argues this is an intentional connection on Eliot's part and one that Eliot created in order to develop her own identity as a writer and woman. Specifically, Kreisel reads Hetty as a kind of cautionary tale, "her inability to formulate expectations" marking her "as a bad author – as opposed to the good author whose understanding springs from her womanly sympathy – for it is the careful delineation of consequences and motives which is the primary concern of the novel itself" (Kreisel 560). I diverge from Kreisel here, and argue that, rather than representing a moral failing which Eliot is hoping to overcome, the way in which Hetty's vision of the future differs from what actually happens in Eliot's plot is simply another example of the tension necessary for forming sympathy.

Indeed, one of the strongest reasons for Hetty's anger at Arthur (and at her baby by association) is because of "the shattering of all her little dream-world" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 363), not because of its actual effects (although those are also severe). Hetty herself reflects that "that dry-eyed morning misery . . . is worse than the first shock, because it has the future in it as well as the present" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 364), evidence that her narratorial failing is not a matter of consequence itself, but of her inability to cross that boundary between the self and others. Although Hetty learns too late how to love her child and how to access the sympathy her character has created, it is apparent when she tells Dinah, "I longed so to be safe at home. I don't know how I felt about the baby. I seemed to hate it . . . and yet its crying went through me" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 492), that she is not lost in Eliot's eyes. Indeed, it is in her distance from the

narrative that she aligns with it more strongly than ever before. Even Adam, arguably one of the novel's moral centers along with Dinah, adopts Hetty's same angry tone to argue on her behalf, claiming that "when a man's spoiled his fellow-creatur's life, he's no right to comfort himself with thinking good may come out of it: somebody else's good doesn't alter her shame and misery" (Eliot, *Adam Bede* 498). As such, it seems that even while Hetty is moving towards society's expectations for her role and emotions, so are the other characters recognizing the legitimacy of her passion and anger as well. Ultimately, Eliot is showing us the slow process of forming sympathy at work. Although unfortunate, cruel, and even harsh, it is exactly and only this set of circumstances and ideals which allowed Eliot to give sympathy to an apparently irredeemable and angry woman.

The emotional landscapes of Eliot's novels are far from straight-forward, as even this limited look at Maggie Tulliver and Hetty Sorrel has shown. Eliot's conception of sympathy, the lens through which we understand human action and emotion in her early novels, is necessarily based on a narrative tension and conflict both within and between characters, and thus within and between Eliot in her own relationship to the novels such characters exist within. Female anger is a particularly pertinent form of sympathy-forming conflict because Eliot has purposely made it difficult for her characters and narrator themselves to recognize such anger and to reconcile it with their worldview, couching it in terms of self-denial or childlike petulance (in the case of Maggie and Hetty respectively). Rather than discrediting their emotional lives and their status as objects of sympathy, however, Eliot's representation of displaced anger forces readers to recognize and legitimize such emotion within their own socially contingent vocabulary, ultimately allowing such anger to thrive even where it seems most repressed. As a result, Maggie

and Hetty's own internal conflicts and grasps at sympathy come to embody those of the text as a whole, not only acting out the conflict between the self and the other that predicates sympathy, but modelling it, even for Eliot herself. Although both *The Mill on the Floss* and *Adam Bede* end in tragedy for their passionate female characters, their role in defining sympathy permeates and persists throughout the text, providing a similarly persistent conflict for Eliot herself and for readers throughout texts that purport to reflect their own lives. Rather than being a problematic element, this unresolved anger and unsatisfying end is the very means by which we can begin to change how we interpret sympathy in our own lives. As Eliot has shown us, it is only by facing and ultimately adopting the most detested and diminished elements of women's lives that we can adopt any amount of true sympathy and understanding for any life, even our own.

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