



ART AND THE AWAKENING OF SYMPATHY:  
GEORGE ELIOT AS POETESS, PROPHET, AND MOTHER

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ii
II.	CHAPTER ONE: Introduction: The Poetry of George Eliot.....	1
III.	CHAPTER TWO: George Eliot and Gender: Sexual Politics in Poetry .....	41
IV.	CHAPTER THREE: George Eliot and Religion: Poetess and Prophet of Sympathy	98
V.	CHAPTER FOUR: George Eliot and Poetess Conventions: Female Community and Motherhood.....	138
VI.	CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion: The Future of George Eliot Studies.....	184
VII.	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	203
VIII.	VITA .....	1
IX.	ABSTRACT.....	2

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction: The Poetry of George Eliot

So man His miniature resemblance gives  
 To matter's every form a speaking soul,  
 And emanation from his spirit's fount,  
 The impress true of its peculiar seal.  
 Here finds he thy best image, sympathy!  
 -George Eliot

When her beloved partner George Henry Lewes died (1878), George Eliot turned to poetry for solace. Her journals reveal profound grief in the copious elegiac passages she copied from Shakespeare, Shelley, Goethe, Chaucer, Tennyson, and Emily Brontë. Eliot also relied on poetry throughout her life to cultivate relationships. In her letters, Eliot cited and discussed poetry (her own and that of others) with her religious mentor, Maria Lewis (*Letters* 1:27-30, 68-69, 111-112, 127), and with friends Martha Jackson (1:109), Mrs. Abijah Hill Pears (124-125), John Sibree (250-51), Charles and Cara Bray (2: 87-88), and Mary Ponsonby (6:406). For one year (from April 1879), she read Dante aloud with John Cross (7:139-40). They also read together Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth during their courtship, which eventually led to marriage. Cross claimed that they read Dante “not in a *dilettante* way but with minute and careful examination of the construction of every sentence” (7:139) and explained that Dante distracted Eliot from “sorrowful memories” of Lewes’ death, took them into “a new world” and was “a renovation of life” (7:140).

Eliot wrote poetry with the same intensity that she read it. She tended to her work scrupulously, all the while struggling with self-doubt, headaches and depression. At times, she put aside her novels to write poetry. She interrupted *Felix Holt* to work on *The Spanish*

*Gypsy* and *Middlemarch* to write *The Spanish Gypsy*, “The Legend of Jubal” and *Armgarth*.

When Eliot began writing poetry in earnest, she was already a famous novelist and wrote poetry despite the fact that it would not earn her significant financial gain or public support.<sup>1</sup>

To Cara Bray she explained: “Don’t you imagine how the people who consider writing simply as a money-getting profession will despise me for choosing a work by which I could only get hundreds, where for a novel I could get thousands . . . Religion and novels every ignorant person feels competent to give an opinion upon, but *en fait de poësie*, a large number of them ‘only read Shakespeare’” (Cross 3:36). She approached poetry with reverence and wrote as a prophet-poet to soothe, instruct, and delight.

Not only did she see herself as a poet, but others recognized her as a poet well. At the outset of her poetry writing career, her publisher John Blackwood wished Eliot “success for [her] debut as a Poet . . .” (*Letters* 4:442) and wrote to her upon reading the manuscript for *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems*: “You must have been thinking if not writing Poetry all your life” (6:37). Historian and literary critic Frederic Harrison thought *Felix Holt* was destined to be a poem rather than a novel. He wrote to Eliot:

I find myself taking it up as I take up Tennyson or Shelley or Browning and thinking out the sequences of thought suggested by the undertones of the thought and the harmony of the lines. Can it be right to put the subtle finish of a poem into the language of a prose narrative? It is not a waste of toil? And yet whilst so many readers must miss all that, most of them even not consciously observing the fact, that they have a really new species of literature before them (a romance constructed in the

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot began writing poetry in earnest in 1864 when she started *The Spanish Gypsy*. She published poetry regularly from the publication of “O May I Join the Choir Invisible” (the poem which launched her career as a poet) in 1867 until the publication of “The Death of Moses” in 1879, the year before she died.

artistic spirit and aim of a poem) yet it is not all lost. I know whole families where the three volumes have been read chapter by chapter and line by line and reread and recited as are the stanzas of *In Memoriam*. . . . Are you sure that your destiny is not to produce a poem—not a poem in prose but in measure—a drama? (4:284-85)

Eliot's fame as a novelist overshadowed her work as a poet, but her role as a poet was meaningful to her. When she submitted *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* to Blackwood, she wrote, "every one of those [poems] I now send you represents an idea which I care for strongly and wish to propagate as far as I can. Else I should forbid myself from adding to the mountainous heap of poetical collections" (6:26). One of the key questions involving this body of work, however, is how to situate it. Is her poetry, as Harrison might suggest, a transfer of her novelistic vision to "measure"? Or is it a departure from her artistic aim? Should she be deemed a major innovator or as a novelist gone off course? How should Eliot be placed as a poet?

To answer these questions, one might begin with an examination of her poetic approach, which relied on the use of the gender-specific and religiously inspired poetess tradition. Charles Laporte explains that nineteenth-century British readers conceived of a categorical distinction between men's and women's poetry. Readers talked about the poetess as distinguishable either by the fact of her sex or by the feminine characteristics of her work: "tenderness, sentimentality, and investment in what Lydia Sigourney (1791-1865) has famously called '[t]he whole sweet circle of domestic affections.'" ("Poetess as Prophet" 160). Laporte further explains: "The nineteenth-century use of 'poetess' conflates gender difference with specifically literary difference, and the distinction between these has never been fully drawn in subsequent scholarship" (160). The poetess relied on stereotypically



feminine poetic models to influence the cultural landscape and provide a guiding influence akin to the influence of the Bible (159). Eliot positioned herself as a poetess with spiritual authority in order to forward a religion of sympathy which promoted compassion for others and did not rely on an orthodox system of belief. Eliot's firm place within the self-consciously feminine poetess tradition reveals a keen ability to adopt seemingly unlikely methods to promote ideas that she espoused in her novels and non-fiction. By assuming a poetess stance and adopting feminine conventions, she affirmed her role as poet/prophet, took on poetic authority, and championed her cause of creating a better humanity. At what point she established her prophetess persona is hard to say. Her novels reveal some aspects of a poetess sensibility—especially her pervasive doctrine of sympathy toward others. However, nowhere is her prophetess persona more evident than in her poetry.

My purpose in this dissertation is to show how George Eliot advances her religion of sympathy by placing herself within the gender-specific and spiritually motivated poetess tradition. I will analyze a number of her poetical works and discuss her participation in the poetess tradition—a tradition that relied on women writers' maneuvering gender and religious boundaries—so that readers may gain a better overall understanding of Eliot and her work. I will also explore Eliot's complex stance on women's issues and show how her unconventional relationship with Lewes, her non-participation in the women's movement, her interactions with other women (positive and negative), and her role as mother to younger men and women all informed her thought and writing. These gender-related issues along with her turning away from orthodoxy and toward a doctrine of sympathy influenced all her writing—and especially her writing of poetry.

In this chapter, I present an overview of the project to give a sense of the larger

parameters of the work and provide a foundation for the issues that I will return to and explore in depth in later chapters. Here, I introduce Eliot's concept of sympathy and the poetess tradition. I also review scholarly criticism on this tradition, noting the omission of Eliot in these studies. Finally, I survey Eliot criticism to show that the majority of critics focus their discussions on her novels and essays. The scant treatment of her poetry renders a gap in the understanding of Eliot's work as a whole. By pointing out these critical omissions, I hope to demonstrate the need for a full-length study of George Eliot's poetry and her role as poetess, prophet, and mother.

#### SYMPATHY AND RELIGION

For Eliot, the term "sympathy" usually meant something similar to the modern-day usage of the word: understanding and sharing in the feelings of others. According to the *OED*, sympathy in the nineteenth-century meant

Conformity of feelings, inclinations, or temperament, which makes persons agreeable to each other; community of feeling; harmony of disposition (entry 3a), The quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others; fellow-feeling (entry 3b), and [specifically] the quality or state of being thus affected by the suffering or sorrow of another; a feeling of compassion or commiseration. (entry 3c)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to the *OED*, sympathy also meant a "(real or supposed) affinity between certain things, by virtue of which they are similarly or correspondingly affected by the same influence" (entry 1a); "[a] relation between two bodily organs or parts (or between two persons) such that disorder, or any condition, of the one induces a corresponding condition in the other" (entry 1b); and "[a]greement, accord, harmony, consonance,

At times, Eliot used sympathy to refer to conformity of feelings, community of feelings, or harmony of disposition (entry 3a) such as when she explained her relationship with Lewes to John Chapman: “Affection, respect, and intellectual sympathy deepen” (*Letters* 2:173). To François D’Albert-Durade she also described the “moral and intellectual sympathy” she found with Lewes (3:186). In a letter to Sara Hennell in October 1843, she used the word sympathy to mean communal harmony. In describing the need for tolerance of others’ religious views, she explained that “truth of feeling” is “the only universal bond of union” and urged acceptance: “are we to remain aloof from our fellow-creatures on occasions when we may fully sympathize with the feelings exercised, although our own have been melted into another mould?” (1:162).<sup>3</sup> Her own experience with post-apostasy religious intolerance (and subsequent broken relationships) taught her that sharing “truth of feeling” with others was more valuable than holding dogmatic beliefs (Christian or non-Christian).

At other times, Eliot used the term sympathy to mean feeling compassion (*OED* entry 3c).<sup>4</sup> For instance, she wrote to Sara Hennell upon the death of Sara’s mother: “Words are very clumsy things—I like less and less to handle my friends’ sacred feelings with them. For even those who call themselves ‘intimate’ know very little about each other—hardly ever know just *how* a sorrow is felt, and hurt each other by their very attempts at sympathy or consolation. . . .” (2:465). In this statement, she equates sympathy with consolation while

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concord; agreement in qualities, likeness, conformity, correspondence” (entry 2). Eliot did not use the word sympathy in these contexts.

<sup>3</sup> Eliot is explaining her softening attitude toward Christian doctrine. Haight points out in a footnote that Mary Sibree described her shifting views in March 1843: Eliot is “not now so desirous of controversy. She, however, appeared, to me at least, to have rather changed her ground on some points moral in its influence.” (162).

<sup>4</sup> Here, I group together definitions 3b and 3c since 3c is a specific instance of 3b. 3a is a more general understanding of the word sympathy and refers to people relating to one another harmoniously, especially in a community setting.

explaining how difficult it is to express sympathy with words. She also tellingly describes her friends' feelings as sacred. Throughout her life, she continued to develop her belief in the sacredness of feelings and human relations and eventually found her calling in teaching others to treat fellow human beings with compassion.

Most often, Eliot used the word "sympathy" to mean sharing the feelings of others, fellow-feeling (*OED* entry 3b). To share in another's feelings, a person must understand the feelings. Eliot used sympathy expressly to mean "knowing" or "understanding" in a number of instances.<sup>5</sup> For example, she said to Barbara Bodichon, her friend who was first to discover that Eliot was the pseudonymous author of *Adam Bede*: "God bless you, dearest Barbara, for your love and sympathy. You are the first friend who has given any symptom of knowing me—the first heart that has recognized me in a book which has come from my heart of hearts" (3:63). She used the term "sympathy" to mean entering into the feelings of another when she wrote to Charles Bray: "know that wherever I am, there is one among that number of your friends...who enter into your present experience with the light of memories; for kind feeling can never replace fully the sympathy that comes from memory" (3:391). In this statement, she expressed her friendship with the Brays as deeply sympathetic because it was based on years of knowing each other and forming memories together.

After leaving the Christian faith, Eliot transformed the idea of sympathy

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<sup>5</sup> Suzy Anger explains a similar idea in her discussion of Eliot's "hermeneutics of sympathy." She states: "Eliot's primary concern was understanding others, and, especially, linguistic interpretation" (96). According to Anger, Eliot did not think theological exegesis was helpful, and she tried to make a better secular hermeneutic: a hermeneutic of sympathy (96). Eliot promoted an ethic of sympathy and selflessness and a morality that insisted on people respecting others. She states: "By striving to enter imaginatively into the perspectives of others, one can work against the limitations of subjective perspective, and so more correctly 'divine' (a favorite word of Eliot's) the meanings of their words" (99). Anger views Eliot's concern with sympathy in terms of linguistic interpretation. I relate Eliot's concern with sympathy to religious belief.

(understanding and feeling for others) into a philosophy of being and living. Sympathy for others became the driving force behind Eliot's thinking and writing, and the concept of sympathy thoroughly influenced her mature works. Her religious transformation from the High Church Anglicanism of her childhood to the fervent evangelicalism of her adolescence to a strident anti-orthodox position in her 20s finally settled into a sympathetic appreciation for all people and religions that explore truth with honesty and fellow-feeling and a belief that compassion and understanding between humans, whether in a religious or non-religious context, embodies all that is most sacred.<sup>6</sup> This development in Eliot's personal religious journey appears in the religious bent of her works. Critics acknowledge her stance on sympathy in her novels and essays but rarely remark on such views expressed in poetry. As a poetess, Eliot relied on religion and sympathy to widen the English vision, to teach readers how to understand and share in the common lot of humanity, and to lead them toward a fuller consciousness of ethical and moral progress.

#### THE POETESS TRADITION

The poetess tradition was deeply invested in religion and feminine sympathy. Women poets relied on religion and femininity to claim authority to write poetry—a traditionally masculine art form. Feminist scholars of nineteenth-century British poetry have discussed this tradition at length, and in doing so they frequently refer to the works of Letitia Landon (L.E.L.), Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Christina Rossetti. They rarely include George Eliot in their investigations. Scholars have focused attention on her novels,

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<sup>6</sup> I will discuss in greater detail Eliot's religious background and her stance toward sympathy in chapter three.

essays, and her life but have given scant attention to her poetic oeuvre.<sup>7</sup> Reasons for this omission might stem from the belief that a renowned woman of intellect participating in a feminine tradition seems incongruous, or that her fame as a novelist, translator, editor, and philosopher have overshadowed her work as a poet. Or perhaps her non-traditional religious views and controversial lifestyle seem out of place within a tradition marked by feminine piety. Eliot's exclusion from this critical discussion renders it incomplete. The following survey will summarize the critical discussions of nineteenth-century women's poetry and introduce ways to include Eliot in future conversations. Scholars who discuss nineteenth-century women's poetry address the use of the term "poetess," the societal role of women poets, the persona of the poetess, the cohesiveness of women poets, and feminine conventions of women's poetry writing.

One scholarly debate concerns what to call nineteenth-century women poets. The *OED* states that the term "poetess" first came into usage in 1530 and defines a "poetess" as "a female poet; a woman who composes poetry." This simple definition encompasses a general meaning but does not take into account the complexity with which the term was used in the nineteenth-century. The term referred to a feminine tradition of poetry writing.<sup>8</sup> Some critics take issue with the use of the term "poetess" because of the confusion behind its meaning. Bernard Richards, for example, recognizes its wide usage in the nineteenth-century

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<sup>7</sup> One notable exception is critic Charles Laporte, who situates Eliot in the poetess tradition and analyzes her poetry in light of this tradition. I will discuss his important findings briefly in a review of Eliot criticism later in this section and again in greater depth in chapter three.

<sup>8</sup> In her study of the Romantic transatlantic poetess tradition, Laura Mandell points out that critics may disagree as to whether or not a particular woman poet is a poetess. One critic focusing on woman poet's domestic poems might classify her as a poetess while another critic looking at her political poems might not. So, argues Mandell, the use of the term "poetess" may refer more to a style of writing than to the poets themselves: "It is possible, then, that, in thinking about "the poetess," we are dealing less with individuals and more with poems" (12).

but suggests instead referring to “women poets” rather than “poetesses” (207). Virginia Blain explains the complexity of the term “poetess”: “The word ‘poetess,’ [was] almost ubiquitous in the Victorian period . . . We tend nowadays to deride its use, along with all of the feminizing diminutives . . . Yet even in Victorian usage ‘poetess’ is an unstable term, taking on different coloration according to context and being increasingly open to shifting meanings” (31). Blain goes on to explain that during the transition from the Romantic to the Victorian periods, the term “poetess” was caught up in the struggle over the feminization of literature (32). Those threatened by what they perceived to be the female takeover of the male domain of literature used the term in a derogatory manner, “picking up overtones, perhaps, from ‘poesy’ in the trite or lightweight sense of that word, or from the more trenchantly contemptuous ‘poetaster,’ an exclusively masculine term commonly applied from the end of the sixteenth century to versifiers who never quite succeeded as poets” (32). The term “poetaster” suggests “a simulacrum of a poet, a rimester who imitates the ‘higher’ art of a true poet. Like ‘poetess,’ it can be used for either a professional hack or an amateur dabbler; unlike ‘poetess,’ it had no meaning that could be construed in any approving way” (32). Although the term “poetess” was at times used to deride and patronize, it could have positive and legitimizing appeal. Eliot and her publisher John Blackwood both used the term “poetess” with approbation. Eliot said in a review of *Aurora Leigh* that Elizabeth Barrett Browning “has shown herself all the greater poet because she is intensely a poetess” (“Belles Lettres” 306), and Blackwood referred to Eliot as the “great Novelist and Poetess” (4:452). I employ the term “poetess” in this work, despite its current ability to rankle, not to pigeonhole or diminish women poets but rather to refer to a historically significant tradition of writing that had a legitimizing function in the nineteenth-century.

Victorian scholars also address women poets' societal role. Women writers in general faced obstacles in their professional pursuits, but women poets in particular found legitimacy a struggle. Dorothy Mermin explains that the nineteenth-century recognized great women novelists but not great women poets ("The Damsel" 65). Novel writing, Mermin explains, was more accessible to women because it held less prestige as a new occupation: "Publication seemed like unwomanly self-display, or even sexual self-exposure, and could be justified more easily if one wrote novels to make money rather than poems just for glory" (65). Mermin explains the reasons for the prejudice against women poets: women's imagination was deemed only personal and superficial; women did not have access to the classical education that was needed for understanding high culture; traditional notions of the role of the poet as priest were masculine; women were not self-assertive enough to write poetry; and women were too repressed to write strong lyrics (65). Mermin is correct in pointing out that women authors wrote more fiction than verse; however, since her essay appeared, scholars have recovered and written extensively on the rich tradition of nineteenth-century women poets and their embrace of roles as poetic sages and prophets.<sup>9</sup> Women novelists were able to write publicly with more ease than women poets, but women poets did write, and they often did so in a tradition that set them apart from their male counterparts.

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<sup>9</sup> Angela Leighton, writing six years after Mermin, helps to fill in scholarly gaps, examining the work of nine neglected nineteenth-century women poets in her groundbreaking work, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (1992). She explains in her introduction that women's poetry is neglected, not non-existent (3). Jerome McGann also recovers neglected women poets in his influential work, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (1996). He calls for a reexamination of the poetry of sensibility, exploring the works of twenty poets of sensibility. He claims that this poetry has been neglected by critics and New Historicists who found mid-century poetry to be excessive and overly feminine and that it has been analyzed for its moral, not poetic, element. The ever-increasing amount of scholarship on women poets throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century reveals that women's poetry was for decades marginalized but that it can and should be continually brought into critical view. George Eliot is among the overlooked women poets who merit study.



Women's poetry was popular, though often not taken seriously, and for some women writers, it provided a necessary means of financial support.

Women who wrote seemingly spontaneous, feminine verse out of financial necessity and who published in popular annuals or literary magazines, with the help of male publishers, were not considered a threat to society. In the early part of the nineteenth-century, decorated literary annuals (also known as gift books and keepsakes) containing essays, fiction, and poetry of a sentimental or religious nature flourished. Their market appeal equated to high fees for contributors, and though not respected as containing serious work, well-known authors such as Scott, Southey, Moore, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Ruskin, and Tennyson were not above contributing to them (Leighton 49). Women, in particular, found the annuals a safe and appealing place for publication. Angela Leighton explains that "women were less anxious than men about the taint to their reputations, perhaps because the annuals offered a context for publication which, being largely female, on the one hand presupposed a kind of literary modesty but, on the other, offered a discreetly lucrative living" (49). Women writers, whether or not they wrote out of financial necessity, had to take care not to flout their public role. By appearing conventional and feminine, women writers could avoid drawing attention to their personal lives and inviting scandal. Women poets could contribute seemingly simple, pious poems to annuals and literary magazines without threatening traditional notions of womanhood. Their readers could happily assume that they wrote spontaneous, emotional lines of verse in the comfort of their homes without shirking household duties.

Eliot did not write poetry out of financial necessity but rather was compelled by a desire to write something deeply meaningful without the constraints of the novel form. Eliot turned to poetry after having established herself as a novelist, and she knew that many would

resist her poetic efforts and find them unexpected and confusing. She wrote to Cara Bray about writing poetry: “I expect a good deal of disgust to be felt towards me in many quarters for doing what was not looked for from me, and becoming unreadable to many who have hitherto found me readable and debatable” (Cross 3:36). Eliot elevated poetic achievement above novel writing and turned to verse to achieve something greater than she had yet achieved in her novels. Charles Laporte points out the fact that Eliot’s novels often invoke the cult of poetry and cites numerous instances of her reverent attitude toward poetry as the “heart of religion and the ground of culture” (*Victorian Poets* 193). He also importantly notes that her conception of poetry “betrays a tendency to blur the distinction between verse and inspiration in a manner that perversely literalizes the ideas of earlier Romantic theorists” (194). Nineteenth-century theorists often conflated poetry and high literary art, and so Eliot’s taking up verse after her success as a serious novelist was no great leap. Robert Browning’s praise of *Romola* as “the noblest and most heroic prose poem” that he had ever read (*Letters* 4:96) reflected the common practice of using “poetry” to comment on the level of achievement in prose (Laporte, *Victorian Poets* 195-96). A number of critics have commented on the poetic achievement of Eliot’s prose; however, Frederic Harrison’s wish for Eliot to recreate *Felix Holt* into a poem “not in prose but in measure” was a literal request to write a poem. Eliot’s response to Harrison’s letter (cited above) revealed her belief in the lesser power of the novel to achieve greatness: “I assure you your letter is an evidence of a fuller understanding than I have ever had expressed to me before . . . all the miseries one’s obstinate egoism endures from the fact of being a writer of novels—books which the dullest and silliest reader thinks himself competent to deliver an opinion on” (*Letters* 4:300). In his effort to convince Eliot to write a positivist epic poem, he equated her with great poets such

as Tennyson, Shelley, and Browning. Laporte notes the deep impression his letter made on Eliot, who pondered the significance and possibility of joining the ranks of the great poets (196). She read his letter “many times” and claimed to have “always kept it at hand” (*Letters* 4:300, 448), and confided her secret intent to lay aside *Felix Holt* to write the dramatic poem, *The Spanish Gypsy* (4:301), suggesting her desire to use poetry “to build an artistic foundation for post-Christian morality” and “use poetry as a tool to ‘urge the human sanctities’ . . . in a nation that seemed destined to outlive its Christian past” (*Victorian Poets* 196). Unlike women poets who wrote out of financial necessity, Eliot sought to express moral truths through the high art of poetry, and the public role of the poetess provided her access to this lofty goal.

In addition to the poetess’s public role, her persona invites scholarly interest. Yopie Prins explains that nineteenth-century readers oftentimes read poetry to find a picture of the poetess in the poem and identify with her public personality. The figure of the poetess, she asserts, produced an “unmediated, immediate response of sympathy” in the readers who become “sentimental readers, identifying with the personification and effacing [themselves] in order to sympathize with the face of ‘the poetess herself in the frontispiece’” (50-51). The woman poet, Prins states, lent herself to sympathetic identification because of the readers’ interest in her public life (51). Linda Peterson further explains that biographies of women poets reproduced and helped to construct the myth of the poetess. The biographies of Mary Robinson and L.E.L., for instance, associated the woman poet’s body with her work, which accordingly seemed to be confessional and emotional (116). Views of the poetess as an improvisatrice, a statue, or an object of art turned the woman into a form of artistic property created for the man’s pleasure (117). The myth of the poetess as improvisatrice had the

advantage of linking the woman poet to genius and inspiration but the disadvantage of associating her with “infantile poetic effusions,” rather than with serious writing (120). Like Robinson and L.E.L., Eliot was a public figure associated with scandal, but she was better able to distance herself from a mythologized poetic persona by masking her feminine identity early in her writing career and associating outwardly with femininity and domesticity in her poetry. Aside from the autobiographical “Brother and Sister” and possibly *Armgarth*, which some critics read as an expression of her artistic anxiety, Eliot’s poetry does not serve as material for discovery of her life. Eliot was careful to deflect attention from her actual life and construct an image of herself as a sympathetic mother poet by returning to the themes of domesticity and motherhood and appealing to spirituality and sympathy in her poems.

Susan Brown also explores the persona of the poetess, arguing that the mark of gender for the poetess was both enabling and constraining for the nineteenth-century woman poet (“The Victorian Poetess” 180). Brown explores how understandings of the poetess “are informed by a commodified aestheticism that frequently conflates the woman poet’s body with her literary corpus” (181). Poetry, she explains, “is for women a mode, not an occupation. For women writers, the major problem in this formulation is that women are poetry. They live and inspire it but they do not write it, while other people—namely men—have the privilege to do so” (181). Eliot understood this concept. In *Middlemarch*, she describes Dorothea Brooke as the representation, not the producer, of art. When Dorothea tells Will Ladislaw that she understands what he means by “knowledge passing into feeling” (for him, the essence of being a poet) but that she could “never produce a poem,” he replies: “You *are* a poem—and that is to be the best part of a poet—what makes up the poet’s consciousness in his best moods” (223). Though Dorothea understands the poetic sensibility,

she cannot write poetry. She can only *be* poetry. Dorothea embodies the problem of the poetess—the difficulty in extricating herself from art. More importantly, she realizes the importance of the poems themselves. She says to Will: “But you leave out the poems . . . I think they are wanted to complete the poet” (223). Dorothea may not be able to write poetry, but she understands that the true mark of a poet is one who can produce actual work rather than residing in inchoate feeling and imaginative states.

In her discussion of the persona of the woman poet, Brown describes two strains of poetess: one in the likeness of Felicia Hemans who adhered to domestic ideology, and another in the likeness of L.E.L., who (unlike Hemans) was associated with rumor and sexual scandal. Both engaged with male Romanticism while insisting on a distinctively feminine poetic sensibility, but L.E.L. took more risks (186). Hemans, though separated from her husband, maintained a feminine ideal. Her poetry emphasized domestic ideology, nationalism, imperialism, and gender (188-89). L.E.L., on the other hand, lived more recklessly. Rumors of affairs invited public scrutiny. Consequently, readers concentrated more and more attention on her actual body than her body of writing, which led to a damaged reputation, a broken engagement, and an early death rumored to be suicide. Leighton points out that both women were forced to write for a living, both risked losing respectability by their appearance in the popular press, and neither had the leisure to develop their talents (51). Linda Hughes also discusses Hemans and L.E.L., explaining that both women enjoyed public success and appealed to their readership by upholding domestic and religious ideology in verse while taking risks such as paying homage to Byron (as Hemans did) and identifying with the Sapphic tradition of rendering passion as physical sensation (as L.E.L. did) (170-71). Hughes states: “the poetess pays lip service to contemporary domestic manuals and

critical standards even while crafting a less overt rhetorical poetics that enlarges the imagined poetic space within which a middle-class woman could move” (172). Unlike Hemans and L.E.L., Eliot’s reputation was damaged not just by rumors but by her blatant choice to live openly with Lewes (who was married to but estranged from Agnes Jervis). She wrote anonymously to avoid public disapproval of her lifestyle translating to disapproval of her writing. By the time her identity was discovered, she was already acclaimed for having written her first novel, *Adam Bede*. Her friend Barbara Bodichon wrote to Eliot upon discovering her identity: “1<sup>st</sup>. That a woman should write a wise and *humourous* book which should take a place by Thackeray. 2<sup>nd</sup>. That YOU *that you* whom they spit at should do it!” (*Letters* 3:56). Lewes wrote to Bodichon, “It is quite clear that people would have sniffed at [*Adam Bede*] if they had known the writer to be a woman but they can’t now unsay their admiration” (3:106). Eliot avoided L.E.L.’s fate by hiding her femininity behind a male pseudonym, and by doing so she established a secure reputation as a great writer before she began her poetry writing career. And, like Hemans, she overtly adhered to domestic ideology in her poetry (though subtly, she interjected subversive commentary on domestic themes). Consequently, her poetess persona was not publicly associated with her scandalous lifestyle. Having already achieved literary greatness with her novels, Eliot could not be dismissed merely as a woman (or worse, as a scandalous woman) when she came to write poetry. Freed from the link between poetry and scandal, she was able to write verse without biographical associations and assert herself as a spiritual guide.

Victorian scholars also discuss whether or not women poets should be viewed as a cohesive group. Marion Thain focuses on the theme of “women’s poetry” in reference to multiple poetic personae (576). Various poetic personae (female aesthete, poetess, New

Woman poet) possess “distinctive literary conventions (of form and style as well as content) which distinguish them from purely social types and which might enable us to identify through them distinctive poetic alternatives to the poetess tradition” (576). These alternatives challenge the unity implied by the expression “women’s poetry.” Women poets, she argues, had diverse opportunities (576-77). Thain suggests a translation of the term “women’s poetry,” to “women’s poetries,” which would recognize the many gendered positions assumed by women by the end of the nineteenth-century (582). She argues against the sense of unity among women poets in contrast to the poetic diversity of male poets and urges critics and readers to explore women poets’ multiplicity of positions and conventions (582).

Anne Mellor also challenges the notion of a unified woman’s poetry. She acknowledges the poetess tradition but explains that not all poetry written by women falls into this poetic practice. She discusses what she calls the “tradition of the female poet” and asserts that the literary tradition of the female poet is political, occupies the public sphere, and begins with seventeenth-century female preachers or prophets (82). She traces the origins of the tradition of the female poet, delving into women’s history of preaching in public and publishing tracts, letters, and poetry (82) and argues that female poetry was didactic, responded to political events, argued for social reform, or tried to initiate social revolution (85). Both Thain and Mellor are right to point out the multiplicity among nineteenth-century women poets; however, acknowledging a poetess tradition (as Mellor does) does not discount that multiplicity. Rather, it shows how women poets expressed their various views and achieved individual aims by participating in an established tradition that gave them authority to proffer their views. Eliot, for example, wrote within the poetess tradition, but her poetry is far from one-dimensional. She wrote epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry. She also included

poetical epithets in her novels. Her subject matter ranged from unrequited love to religious mythology, and she took the reader to faraway times and places. She did not take overt stands on political and social concerns but discreetly commented on social issues through a stance of sympathy. Her poetry was diverse, and yet the reader can find poetess conventions throughout.

Peterson, Thain, Mellor, Brown, and Prins all recognize an underlying poetess tradition that in some sense unifies women poets. Yet all of these critics seek to avoid an overly cohesive view of the poetess and focus on the differences in women's poets. This backlash against the idea of the poetess as a united group of women poets is a natural one. Critics wish to honor individual women poets and celebrate their unique qualities. It is important, however, to understand the ways in which nineteenth-century woman poets were able to thrive. Perhaps no critic has written more on the poetess tradition than Isobel Armstrong. Armstrong does not distinguish between the poetess and the woman poet.<sup>10</sup> Nor does she discuss distinctions or personae of women poets. Instead, she argues for a poetess tradition that involved established conventions.<sup>11</sup> Her claim that women poets employed many of the same writing tactics has provoked extensive debate. Many critics take

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<sup>10</sup> In her essay, "The Gush of the Feminine," Armstrong addresses the difficulty involved with how to think of Romantic women's poetry. An established discourse and hermeneutics have developed for men's poetry but not for women's. She asks how we talk about women without such a discourse. Armstrong states: Mostly female poets are confined to the realm of affect and domesticity and described as W. M. Rossetti described Felicia Hemans; he spoke of the 'cloying flow' of her 'feminine' poetry. There are enormous differences among women Romantics, but it is important to get away from the gush of the feminine regarded simply as a consent to nonrational and emotional experience. This is often, as in the case of Hemans and Rossetti, a *male* description of women's poetry. (15)

Armstrong concludes that "the gush of the feminine is a fallacy. Read for its analytical power, the intricacy and self-consciousness of women's poetry become almost self-evident" (32). Armstrong recognizes the differences among women poets while striving to create a discourse with which to discuss women's poetry.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Armstrong explains that women used travel, masks, and role-play to protect against self-exposure, and in doing so, controlled their objectification (*Victorian Poetry* 324-25). I will discuss these and other poetess conventions that women poets (including Eliot) used in crafting their work in chapter four.



Armstrong's thesis to mean that women poets were not diverse. But perhaps they misunderstand her point. She does not assert that all nineteenth-century women poets were alike. Rather, she suggests that by the mid-nineteenth-century, the poetess tradition and conventions for women's verse were well-established and that many women poets associated with other women writers and developed a feminine style of writing that society accepted (*Victorian Poetry* 322-23).<sup>12</sup> Specifically, she explains, they adopted an affective mode of writing, "a music of [their] own," to communicate potentially subversive ideas in an affective or sentimental mode that might have been pious, simple, and/or "feminine" (323-24).

According to Armstrong, affect became the dominant mode of expression for the poetess in the early and mid-nineteenth-century. Women poets adopted an "affective mode, often simple often pious, often conventional" to help quell the pervading fear of revolution and class and racial conflict (324). Women poets capitalized on society's expectation that women poets were emotional, and they used the language of affect to communicate political or social messages. For example, in the poem, "Cry of the Children," Barrett Browning exposes the suffering of child laborers and oppression of factory owners by giving a voice to the children who cry because they are weary from working. Although affect is not a mode that characterizes all of Eliot's poetry, she does employ it at times. In "Erinna" (playing off the poet Erinna, a contemporary of Sappho), she appeals to the reader's sense of pity by evoking the figure of a young poet born around 612 B. C. who died at around age nineteen

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the formal characteristics of poetess poetry as pertains to Romantic British poetry, see Laura Mandell's "Introduction: the Poetess Tradition," published in the online journal *Romanticism on the Net* (26). Mandell's discussion of the poetess tradition is especially useful for scholars of the Romantic transnational poetess tradition. She discusses the history of the term "poetess," the relationship between poetess poetry (which she refers to as "minor") and canonized poetry, the value of sentimental literature to scholars of postmodernism and transatlanticism, and the "poetics" of poetess poetry.

when her mother chained her to a spinning-wheel.<sup>13</sup> The language in “Erinna” reminds the reader of Browning’s “Cry”:

Hark, the passion in her eyes  
 Changes to melodic cries  
 Lone she pours her lonely pain.  
 Song unheard is not in vain. (*Poems* 187)<sup>14</sup>

The trochaic meter throughout “Cry” harshly and monotonously pounds like industrial noise in a factory.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the iambic meter in “Erinna,” at the moment in the poem when she sits at the wheel, echoes the recurrent turn of the spinning wheel. Erinna gazes sadly

At surging visions of her destiny  
 To spin the byssus drearily  
 In insect labour, while the throng  
 Of Gods and men wrought deeds that poets wrought in song. (186)

In both poems, the musicality of the language and use of affect tug at the heartstrings of the reader. Eliot’s use of affect in “Erinna” shows that, at times, she conformed to this poetess convention.

Eliot also employed other poetess conventions. She embraced religious figures and themes such as suffering, alienation, community, and renunciation; she set her poems in

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<sup>13</sup> Erinna wrote “The Distaff” (or “Spindle”), a poem written in memory of her childhood friend, Baucis, to lament lost friendship and past pleasure. The poem, possibly suggesting homoerotic associations between the girls, refers to the games girls played and then put aside for marriage (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 2:110-11).

<sup>14</sup> “Cry of the Children” reads: “They look up with their pale and sunken faces, / And their looks are sad to see.”

<sup>15</sup> For example, “Cry” begins: “Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers, / Ere the sorrow comes with years?”

faraway places and in distant times to escape the rules of her own culture; she adopted a feminine sensibility and taught compassion and feeling by taking on a mother/prophetess persona.<sup>16</sup> Hemans, Landon, Barrett Browning, and Rossetti appear in poetess scholarship frequently, and more recovered women poets enter the critical dialogue every year, but Eliot is still largely left out of the discussion. This study aims to include her into this critical dialogue, and in doing so, invite a fuller understanding of the poetess tradition and of George Eliot.

#### GENDER, RELIGION, AND THE POETESS

Gender and religion were key components of the poetess stance. To overcome societal restrictions imposed by a prevalent ideology of separate spheres, nineteenth-century women writers turned to religion as a source of power as well as legitimacy. Armstrong explains that an “account of women’s writing as occupying a particular sphere of influence, and as working inside defined moral and religious conventions, helped to make women’s poetry and the ‘poetess’ . . . respected in the nineteenth century as they never have been since” (*Victorian Poetry* 321). The notion of separate spheres associated men with intellect, power, and work outside the home and women with emotion, passivity, and work within the home. Free from the corrupting influences of the outside/male sphere, the domestic/female sphere was safe and pure. Society considered women especially well-suited to govern this realm due to their “natural” ability to care for children and run a household. Hughes explains that the middle-class home “was conceived as a refuge presided over by a morally pure,

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<sup>16</sup> In chapter four, I will discuss how Eliot uses the poetess themes of community and motherhood to establish her poetess persona and claim authority as a domestic sage.

emotionally nurturing woman, to whom husbands and fathers brutalized by the marketplace could resort for spiritual and emotional sustenance, and under whose benign influence children could be shielded from moral, economic, and sexual taint until they reached adulthood” (168). Leonore Davidoff elaborates on the implications of the separate-spheres ideology for women writers: “As communicants and parishioners, as upholders of religion in the home, and as the wives, sisters, and daughters of the clergy operating the semi-public life of the vicarage, women played a vital role. As a site of morality, religious belief and practice were ambiguous in their gender imagery. While formal preaching was closed to women, various forms of spontaneous prophecy were not” (19-20). Women writers could thus capitalize on their spiritual status by writing on religious and domestic themes.

Women’s wholesome role within the protected middle-class domestic environment contributed to the nineteenth-century essentialist notion that women were spiritually superior to men. Julie Melnyk provides possible reasons for the assumption of women’s spiritual superiority: “the biological function of motherhood,” “social circumstances,” “exclusion from the corrupting marketplace,” and “increased opportunities for edifying suffering offered by their social position” (*Women’s Theology* xi). Society elevated women spiritually and charged them with the duty of imparting spiritual purity and domestic piety within the home. Women poets capitalized on the separate spheres culture by catering to societal expectation and by relying on affective language and supposed spiritual superiority in order to claim poetic and religious authority. Eliot’s successful use of the poetess stance is especially intriguing since she lived unconventionally and promoted unorthodox views. Her position as assistant editor and contributor of essays and reviews for *The Westminster Review* (1851-1856) and her association with a largely male society in London was unusual for a woman.

This activity, along with her living openly with Lewes, placed her in the male sphere and invited ostracism by some, but by the time she began to write poetry, her fame was more influential than her breach of societal decorum. She was able to adopt the religiously motivated poetess stance without attracting attention for her involvement in the male sphere of society.

Women poets could transgress male/female societal boundaries through religious identification. Christine Krueger explains the effects of women's religious identification in *The Reader's Repentance* as she outlines a history of women's literary empowerment that stems from a tradition of female preaching. She argues that evangelical interpretation encouraged women to enter the public/male realm of social discourse and suggests that evangelical hermeneutics allowed women to use the authoritative language of scripture among men and women. Collectively, women achieved greater political power by feminizing social discourse. To do this, they presented female authority in terms of spiritual gifts, condemned the exploitation of women, and urged readers to repent of misogynistic practices (5). Evangelical symbolism gave women a way to represent themselves as authors. As "vessels" bringing forth God's message, women could have been considered passive in relation to language, but male and female preachers used this image while modeling themselves on Old Testament prophets who created this language (10). Women preachers adopted Old Testament prophetic imagery to disguise their subversive power, and they wielded this power skillfully. Krueger explains: "They exploited the paradoxical foundation of evangelical hermeneutics to appropriate the language of God the Father in order to subvert the authority of their temporal masters. This fruitful but precarious role was the legacy inherited by the female social preachers of the nineteenth-century" (11). Krueger's analysis

shows how eighteenth and nineteenth-century women preachers relied on female predecessors to legitimize themselves and to connect to future generations as well (11).<sup>17</sup>

By 1780, the Methodists and the Dissenting Academies supported women preachers, who gained influence and grew in number in the early nineteenth-century. Women used the Bible to claim authority to resist those who hindered their pursuit of higher sanctity (Mellor 83). With this authority, they stepped into the public sphere, published, and spoke out on religious, political, and social topics. By the 1830s-40s, in association with the separate spheres ideology, women were taking responsibility for moral authority. Consequently, society associated the poetess with domesticity, sentimentality, and spirituality, qualities that contrasted with the harsh realities of the masculine public sphere (Brown 187-8). Society came to expect the poetess to reflect the elevated British national character, to uphold domestic ideals, and to collectively preserve the noble national identity (188-90). Female poets claimed divine authority for their prophetic verse and assumed their role as vessels of the divine (Mellor 83).<sup>18</sup> They argued that women had demonstrated fidelity to Christ (more so than men) and that Christian women had the responsibility to teach virtue in the domestic sphere and were in charge of the religious instruction of children. Women poets represented and spoke on behalf of virtue—a quality that was necessary in the private and public realms

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<sup>17</sup> In “The Female Poet and the Poetess, Two Traditions of British Women's Poetry, 1780-1830,” Mellor explains that the tradition of the female poet began with female preachers or prophets who advocated seventeenth-century Quaker theology and belief in the “divine Inner Light” that gave them authority to speak publicly at Quaker meetings (82). By the end of the eighteenth-century, women preachers invoked scriptural authority for the right to speak publicly and claimed to be the voice of Christian virtue (83).

<sup>18</sup> Julie Melnyk agrees that women poets claimed divine authority but explains that they did so for a different purpose. She says that women writers revised and subverted the masculine theology they were discouraged from participating in, and they created their own theology (*Women's Theology* xii). They presented arguments (based on Scripture or on the personal experience of “call” or leading) to justify participating in religious discourse and to assert their right to read and interpret Scripture independent of masculine authority. Many stressed equality of men and women before God and focused on Jesus as Bridegroom of a feminized Soul (xv-xvii).

(84).

In sum, spiritual authority and separate spheres ideology allowed women poets to overcome societal limitations based on gender. Women poets employed a language of affect and wrote on domestic and religious themes in order to assert poetic authority. They used this authority to voice their religious, political, and social opinions. George Eliot was no exception to this trend of women writers speaking out on religious ideas. She translated theological treatises, wrote theological essays, and incorporated religious themes in her novels. Though many critics look to her personal history, her novels, and her essays, comparatively few mine the treasure of her poetical body to gain insight into her religious stance and writing motivation. And still fewer make significant connections between her poetic and religious sensibility in coming to an understanding of her work. Eliot approached religion differently in her poetry. In her non-fiction, she addressed controversial religious matters directly and sometimes confrontationally. In her novels, she was tolerant and non-controversial in her treatment of religious themes. In her poetry, she conveyed untraditional religious ideas subtly under the guise of a feminine persona. By examining her poetry, her participation in the poetess tradition, and her implementation of religion within that tradition, one can understand new facets of a writer known by most only as a writer of non-fiction and fiction.

#### LITERARY CRITICS' LIMITED PERCEPTION OF ELIOT'S POETRY

Eliot oversaw two editions of her poetry in 1874 (*The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems*) and 1878 (*The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems, Old and New*). Another collection of her poems was not available until the publication of Lucien Jenkins's *George Eliot:*

*Collected Poems* in 1989. In 2005, Gerard van den Broek published *The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*, a comprehensive edition of Eliot's shorter poetry including annotations. This authoritative version includes all her poetry except *Armgarth* and *The Spanish Gypsy*.<sup>19</sup> During her lifetime, her poetry sold well (though not as well as her novels) and received mixed but mostly positive reviews.<sup>20</sup> Some early critics endorsed her poetry unequivocally. Others, such as Henry James and Rose Elizabeth Cleveland, claimed the poetry lacked inspiration and blamed her agnosticism as the undermining force (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:xxxiv-xxxviii). After her death, Eliot's novels overshadowed her poetry, and over the years, critics dismissed her poetry as inferior verse (xxxiv). As a result, no full-length study of Eliot's poetry as a whole exists.<sup>21</sup> This study aims to fill in this critical gap.<sup>22</sup>

The most useful sources for surveys of Eliot's poetry include *The Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* and "George Eliot" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 35: Victorian Poets After 1850*. Both discuss the exclusion of her poetry in critical discussions, the significance of her work as a poet, and the poems themselves. While excellent introductions to George Eliot's poetry, these sources are each only a few pages. More extensive critical surveys are needed. Eliot's biographers note her poetry-writing but

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<sup>19</sup> In 1969 Cynthia Ann Secor wrote a doctoral dissertation on the poetry of Eliot, but it was never published (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:xvii).

<sup>20</sup> *Jubal* sold well, and American, German, and Canadian editions were also printed (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:xxxiv).

<sup>21</sup> In 1918, Louis Block wrote cursorily on Eliot's poetry (*The Spanish Gypsy*, "The Legend of Jubal," "A Minor Prophet," "A College Breakfast Party") in "The Poetry of George Eliot" to remark on parallel themes in her poems and novels and to acknowledge the work of a great author. In "George Eliot's Unpublished Poetry," Bernard Paris in 1959 drew attention to Eliot's previously unpublished poetry that was discovered in the Yale University Library's Collection (including "In a London Drawingroom," "Ex Oriente Lux," "Arms! To Arms!," "In the South," five fragments and four untitled poems, "I Grant you Ample Leave," "Erinna," "The Death of Moses," and "Sweet Evenings Come and Go, Love"). Both of these authors inform the reader of the existence of Eliot's poetry and provide summaries and background information. Paris offers some analysis but does not discuss the poetry in detail.

<sup>22</sup> Though this is a full-length study of Eliot's poetry, I do not analyze all of her poems.



have little to say about it, treating it, for the most part, as a departure from her novel-writing. Gordon Haight, in *George Eliot: A Biography*, briefly relays information on the production of Eliot's poems but always in relation to her novel-writing. He treats *The Spanish Gypsy* somewhat more extensively, citing in a few pages (rather than the usual few lines devoted to other poems) the poem's background and Eliot's motivation for writing it (376-79, 402-06). Likewise, more recent biographers such as Gillian Beer (*George Eliot*), Jennifer Uglow (*George Eliot*) and Barbara Hardy (*George Eliot: A Critic's Biography*) mention Eliot's poetry-writing in the context of her novels but do not provide substantive commentary on the poems or their significance to her writing career. Tim Dolin (*George Eliot*) discusses Eliot's Romanticism and her poetic sensibility but only in relation to her role as a novelist (87-88). In a section on religion, he (as does Haight 302) refers briefly to "O May I Join the Choir Invisible" as a positivist poem (173). Angela Leighton includes biographical information and presents "Brother and Sister" and part of *Armgarth* in her anthology, *Victorian Women Poets*. Leighton rightly points out the fact that Eliot's poetry reveals her attitudes on art and womanhood, which are not seen in her novels, but she unfortunately dismisses the poetry as "the work of a novelist on leave" (221).

Occasionally scholarly articles mention *The Legend of Jubal*, "O May I Join the Choir Invisible," or another poem, but most focus on *Armgarth* (for its treatment of authorial and gender issues) and *The Spanish Gypsy* (for its treatment of race and nationalism). Some read *Armgarth* as a dramatization of Eliot's own anxiety about artistic ambition. For example, in "Art and Egoism in George Eliot's Poetry," Bonnie Lisle calls George Eliot a "second-rate poet" but suggests that her poems offer insight into the artist and her novels (263). She explains that the poems help the reader understand why Eliot resorts to marriage for happy

endings in her novels. While Eliot chose the life of an artist for herself, she does not allow her heroines to follow her example (263-64). Lisle refers to “The Legend of Jubal” and *Armgart* to show how Eliot associates art and death. For Eliot, to choose the artist’s life is to choose death (271). The association of art and death relates to Eliot’s assumption of the artist’s role: the death of a former self (Marian Evans) and the birth of an artist (George Eliot) (271).

Rosemarie Bodenheimer also reads *Armgart* as a representation of Eliot’s artistic anxiety. She discusses Eliot’s struggle with ambition, her fear of the “public woman” stigma, and her reservations about women on the stage (8-9). Bodenheimer argues that Eliot projected her anxieties about ambition and audience onto her characters who were women artists (9-10). She discusses Christina as a musician in “Mr Gilfil” (15-17), Dinah as a rhetorician in *Adam Bede* (17-19), Mirah and Alcharisi as singers in *Daniel Deronda* (19), and *Armgart* as a musician/performer in *Armgart* (21) to draw parallels to Eliot’s own ambivalence about writing and success (19-21). Bodenheimer suggests that the idea of ambition possessed Eliot during her period of poetry writing and led to the writing of *Middlemarch*—a story about ambitions that fail—and argues that portraits of *Armgart* and Alcharisi reveal Eliot’s fear that ambition is an angry rejection of the traditional life of a woman (21, 25). Kathleen Blake also addresses authorial concerns in her reading of *Armgart*. She proposes that the poem is about the incompatibility of love and art for women artists and says that though Eliot did not have to choose between love and art, the poem reflects her ambivalence about the conflict (75-76). Like Bodenheimer, she compares Alcharisi and *Armgart* (78-80), but unlike Bodenheimer, she reconciles love and art in the end by arguing that Walpurga replaces Graf in the struggle for love (80).

Not all *Armgarth* critics situate the poem in terms of authorial reflection, but most address gender concerns. One critic reads the poem as a feminist treatise. Louise Hudd asserts that one of the aims of *Armgarth* was to prompt discussion “about the way in which women approach sexual politics” and regards the poem as a “political critique of the idealistic feminism of Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, and in particular, the earlier text’s problematic depiction of class politics and social reform” (62-63). She argues that though Eliot may be a “second-rate poet,” she “remains a first rate assessor of the political implications involved in the necessary process of developing a socially effective feminist poetics” (81).

Several scholars comment on form and context in their discussions of gender matters in *Armgarth*. Rebecca Pope addresses the role of opera and the significance of the diva’s voice, explaining that the diva’s voice in women’s writing is “both a mode of and a metaphor for female empowerment in a culture that traditionally places women on the side of silence” (140). Pope examines the context of Eliot’s poem—the actual eighteenth-century Gluck, his opera *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and its performance history—and discusses the significance of Eliot’s choice of this opera which allowed women to sing parts originally written for castrato performers (141-42). Susan Brown describes the form of *Armgarth* as a closet drama and asserts that this form dramatized women’s consciousness and agency (“Determined Heroines” 96).<sup>23</sup> *Armgarth*’s gendered voice differs from the androgynous voice of Eliot’s novels, allowing Eliot to engage with the Woman Question (issues she felt ambivalent about)

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<sup>23</sup> Brown defines closet drama as: “drama that, either by intention or default, finds its performance in the minds of readers within their ‘closets’ or private rooms. Such drama’s ambiguous status—particularly when published . . . within collections of verse—on the boundary between poetry and drama has resulted in a double marginalization by historians of Victorian poetry on the one hand and theater historians on the other” (“Determined Heroines” 89).

forthrightly—in the form of drama not narration (102). Eliot, as well as other female poets, explored literary forms to represent women as determined heroines who are both socially constrained and heroic (106). Grace Kehler also discusses Eliot’s use of dramatic form. She maintains that Eliot’s use of the closet drama form allowed her to probe issues of agency and gender in *Armgarth* and discusses form as it relates metaphorically to the poem’s lament for the lost and suppressed voices (“*Armgarth’s Voice Problems*” 148). Rob Breton reads the poem in the context of the popular theatre and the Reform Act of 1867 in “*The Thrill of the Trill: Political and Aesthetic Discourse in George Eliot’s Armgarth.*”

In sum, critics who discuss *Armgarth* focus on authorial and gender issues looking at form and historical context to speculate about Eliot’s professional anxieties or her beliefs about women’s issues in the nineteenth-century. Critics of *The Spanish Gypsy*, on the other hand, mostly concentrate on race and nationalism in their scholarly examinations. One exception to this trend is James Krasner, who writes that *The Spanish Gypsy*, like *Armgarth*, is a poem about fame and the artist, representing Eliot’s attempts to relieve herself of the guilt she felt due to public exposure. He indicates that Fedalma, a celebrated dancer/artist and political spokesperson who eschews celebrity and denies the import of her words, hates publicity and claims that Fedalma represents Eliot’s unease with her role as a woman artist and fear of public display (55).

Herbert Tucker discusses heredity, free choice, and the epic aim of *The Spanish Gypsy*, after lamenting the fact that it is “one of the most conspicuously neglected major works left behind by any Victorian writer of the first rank” (414). Joss West-Burnham reads *The Spanish Gypsy* in terms of race, gender, and inheritance, asserting that the poem acts as a prelude to *Daniel Deronda* in “Fedalma—‘The Angel of a Homeless Tribe’: Issues of

Religion, Race and Gender in George Eliot's Poetic Drama, *The Spanish Gypsy*." Miyuki Amano also probes the theme of hereditary claim and notes parallels in *Daniel Deronda*. Likewise, Victor Neufeldt reads the poem as a conflict between personal wishes and hereditary claims and duty and compares the poem to *Romola*, showing how the heroines of both works deny personal fulfillment for public duty and concludes that Eliot holds up this ideal as untenable (44, 51). Sylvia Kasey Marks situates the poem in relation to Eliot's novels, comparing themes, characters and situations. Amit Yahav-Brown explores race in *The Spanish Gypsy*, contending that for Eliot race ultimately fails as a source of social identification (1127). Alicia Carroll also explores race. While she focuses on Eliot's novels, she devotes some attention to *The Spanish Gypsy* in her analysis of Eliot's "dark figures" which, Carroll argues, reveal that Eliot does not uncritically subscribe to the values of the British Empire. Likewise, Deborah Epstein Nord examines race in "Marks of Race," again focusing on novels but mentioning *The Spanish Gypsy*, to compare Gypsy and Jewish characters in Eliot's writing.

Isobel Armstrong mentions Eliot in her discussion of the feminine tradition of women poets and briefly argues that *The Spanish Gypsy* was an attempt to write a humanist myth (*Victorian Poetry* 370). She states that Eliot's repudiation of "silly novels" by lady novelists and her use of the masculine form of the narrative dramatic epic in *The Spanish Gypsy* suggest disinterest in feminine themes that bound together women poets. However, just as Barrett Browning aimed to write the first verse novel by a woman, so Eliot attempted to write the first humanist epic by a woman (370). "At the heart of the poem," Armstrong asserts, "is a question about the extent to which women are capable of producing a powerfully imaginative national myth about unity and cohesion, a matriarchal myth" (371). Armstrong

does not go into detail in her analysis but importantly notes that Eliot “used poetry both to consider consolations which were simpler than those of her novels and to explore a devastating skepticism which was often harsher than her novels intimate” (371). Armstrong helpfully points out the fact that Eliot engaged in a feminine tradition of poetry-writing and that she used poetry to explore ideas in ways unseen in her novels but leaves the in-depth analysis of Eliot’s poetry to future scholars.

Few critics discuss in any detail Eliot’s shorter poetry. West-Burnham and Charles Laporte address a key aspect of Eliot’s poetry: religion. In “Travelling Towards Selfhood,” West-Burnham compares Grace Aguilar, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot to describe how their various religious denominations enable or hinder their writing. These three women journey “towards selfhood and identity through the processes of creativity” offering personal comfort for themselves and support for others through their religious poetry (91). West-Burnham’s work provides the reader with some useful points about the female identity and religious beliefs of Eliot and two of her contemporary women writers. In his article, “George Eliot, The Poetess as Prophet,” and in his recent book, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, Laporte provides perhaps the most insightful analysis of Eliot’s shorter poetry to date. LaPorte takes a unique approach to Eliot’s poetry in providing an important analysis of her poetic achievement by looking at the religious dimension of her poetry. Unlike the above-mentioned scholars who devote their discussions to themes of gender, authorial anxiety, and race, and who focus mostly on *Armstrong* and *The Spanish Gypsy*, LaPorte provides a new perspective by revealing Eliot’s poetess stance and her coordinate use of religion to sound a prophetic voice in her poetry. In his article, he discusses the moral voice and authority of the prophetess, poetry as salvation, and the use of the Bible in the poetess tradition and examines

“O May I Join the Choir Invisible,” “The Legend of Jubal,” “The Death of Moses,” and “A Minor Prophet.” In his book, Laporte discusses the impact of biblical criticism on nineteenth-century literary culture and the understanding of poetry as religious verse akin to Scripture. He rejects the secularization narrative put forth by Victorian scholars and rather argues that the culture was steeped in religion, offering examples of a religious approach to poetry in the works of Barrett Browning, Tennyson, Clough, Browning, and Eliot. Eliot, he argues, believed that “poetic practice should inspire the human spirit to reverence” (*Victorian Poets* 190). By examining *The Spanish Gypsy*, “The Legend of Jubal,” “The Death of Moses,” and “A Minor Prophet” Laporte concludes that Eliot engaged in a sentimental poetic tradition to promote a “philosophical meliorism that we now associate with her fiction” (230). Laporte adeptly shows how Eliot associates poetry and religious feeling through feminine poetics. More studies like LaPorte’s will greatly contribute to the understanding of Eliot’s work.

Most critics who discuss religion, however, analyze Eliot’s novels. A brief survey of some criticism on Eliot and religion will demonstrate the scholarly emphasis on novels and non-fiction and lack of attention to poetry. A number of critics focus on gender in their examinations of religion.<sup>24</sup> For example, in *The Reader's Repentance*, Krueger argues that Eliot’s concept of authorship combines religious beliefs and the “Woman Question.” She explains that Eliot’s writing was a response to a prophetic call similar to that of women preachers (235) and refers to Eliot’s essays and novels to support her claim that Eliot creates

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy Cervetti explores female subjectivity and religion in “The Resurrection of Milly Barton: At the Nexus of Production, Text, and Re-Production” (1992), and Kimberly Adams presents a feminist analysis in her comparison of nineteenth-century writers, relying on *Adam Bede* to examine the Madonna role in “Feminine Godhead, Feminist Symbol: The Madonna in George Eliot, Ludwig Feuerbach, Anna Jameson, and Margaret Fuller” (1996). Frank Christianson examines Eliot’s treatment of altruism in “Christian Evaluation and Moral Action in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*” (2004).

a prophetic narrator who preaches silence and passivity. Some critics who focus on gender and religion examine sexuality in their studies.<sup>25</sup> Kathryn Stockton, for instance, examines spirituality and desire among women characters in Eliot's fiction (especially *Middlemarch*) in two chapters of her feminist book, *God between their Lips: Desire between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot*. George Eliot's interest in Judaism is the source of a number of critical studies.<sup>26</sup> For example, Saleel Nurbhai and K. M. Newton discuss Eliot's attitudes toward Judaism and her use of Jewish mysticism in *George Eliot, Judaism, and the Novels:*

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<sup>25</sup> In *George Eliot and Herbert Spencer: Feminism, Evolutionism, and the Reconstruction of Gender* (1991), Nancy Paxton looks at Herbert Spencer's influence on Eliot's thinking about female sexuality, feminist ambition, and desire. She examines Eliot's novels to compare Spencer's and Eliot's evolutionary construction of gender. Likewise, Frederick Roden discusses spirituality and same-sex desire in "Eppie's Queer Daddy: Spiritual Fatherhood in *Silas Marner*" (2005).

<sup>26</sup> The following sampling of scholarship devoted to Eliot's interest in Judaism refer mostly to her novels, especially *Daniel Deronda*, to support their various arguments. Mikhal Dekel discusses the reception and Hebrew translation of *Daniel Deronda* as well as Eliot's (and women's) place in the male, Hebrew reading tradition in "'Who Taught This Foreign Woman About the Ways and Lives of the Jews?': George Eliot and the Hebrew Renaissance" (2007). Amanda Anderson considers Eliot's treatment of Judaism in *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* in "George Eliot and the Jewish Question" (1997). Alan Levenson discusses European Judaism in relation to *Daniel Deronda* in "Writing the Philosemitic Novel: *Daniel Deronda* Revisited" (2008). Monica O'Brien writes about the treatment of Jews in *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* in "The Politics of Blood and Soil: Hannah Arendt, George Eliot, and the Jewish Question in Modern Europe" (2007). Bernadette Ward argues that Daniel is a sympathetic figure but is stripped of Jewish culture in "Zion's Mimetic Angel: George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*" (2004). Sara Putzell-Korab addresses the treatment of Judaism and the role of the prophet in "The Role of the Prophet: The Rationality of *Daniel Deronda*'s Idealist Mission" (1982). Iveta Jusová examines Zionism in "Edward Said, Reuben Sachs, and Victorian Zionism" (2006). Sarah Willburn discusses mysticism and Zionism in "Possessed Individualism in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*" (2006). Karen Golightly discusses the treatment of Jewish women in "Transforming the Other: The Merrow of Croker's Fairy Legends and the 'Little Jewess' of *Daniel Deronda*" (2005). Anita Lashkarian considers Eliot's treatment of anti-Semitism in "Proto-Zionism and/or Anti-Semitism in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*" (2005). Daniel Novak discusses Jewish identity and disembodiment in "A Model Jew: 'Literary Photographs' and the Jewish Body in *Daniel Deronda*" (2004). Pamela Thurschwell examines telepathy and Judaism in *Daniel Deronda* in "George Eliot's Prophecies: Coercive Second Sight and Everyday Thought Reading" (2004). K. M. Newton discusses racism, Zionism, and the treatment of Jews in "George Eliot and Racism: How Should One Read 'The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!'" (2008). The abovementioned (and many more unmentioned) critics rightly note Eliot's interest in Judaism at a time in England when many were not sympathetic with Jewish people. Inclusion of attractive Jewish characters in her writing affirms her reverence for a group of misunderstood people sincere in their religious beliefs and practices. Critical attention to the Jewish element in Eliot's fiction sheds light on her desire to teach sympathy for social and religious outcasts. Critics have yet to make this point in her poetry, however. Critical discussions of Old Testament allusions and themes in "The Legend of Jubal," "Mordecai's Hebrew Verses" (a poem that appears in chapter 38 of book five of *Daniel Deronda*), "The Death of Moses," and possibly "A Minor Prophet" could also provide insight into Eliot's views on Judaism.



*Jewish Myth and Mysticism*. They devote some time to *The Lifted Veil* and *The Spanish Gypsy* but focus primarily on her novels to shed light on the use of Jewish myth which, they argue, reveals her own drive to find meaning in life after her loss of faith.

Some scholars who examine religion in Eliot's works focus on nineteenth-century psychological and socioreligious matters.<sup>27</sup> A. G. Broek, for example, considers politics, the treatment of the Dissenters, and suffrage in "The Politics of Religion in Felix Holt." Critics also examine ethics and morality in their religious studies of Eliot. Susan Hill explores the treatment of translation and its relationship to ethics in "Translating Feuerbach, Constructing Morality: The Theological and Literary Significance of Translation for George Eliot," and Morton Bloomfield examines Eliot's fiction in his discussion of morality and wisdom literature in "The Tradition and Style of Biblical Wisdom Literature." Others rely on Eliot's writings and the writing of contemporary sources to theorize about her religious and aesthetic

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<sup>27</sup> David Hempton writes about Eliot's attitudes towards evangelical fundamentalism, referring to her scathing article, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," in his book, *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt* (2008). In his article, "Popular Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Fiction" (1987), Hempton compares Charles Dickens, John Ruskin, and Eliot in his analysis of religion in nineteenth-century fiction. Michael Davis analyzes *Daniel Deronda* in his book *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (2006) to investigate the mind and nineteenth-century religious experience. Felicia Bonaparte also refers to *Daniel Deronda* in her discussion of theology and secularism in "*Daniel Deronda*: Theology in a Secular Age" (1993). She deals with this same theme, emphasizing the role of Scripture in "Carrying the Word of the Lord to the Gentiles: *Silas Marner* and the Translation of Scripture into a Secular Text" (1991). John Mazaheri analyzes the concept of work in Christianity in "Religion and Work in *Adam Bede*" (2005). So Young Park focuses on Dorothea Brooke in a discussion of meliorism and the sublime in "The Inward Sublime: Deconversion and Meliorism in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*" (2008). Robert Lewis discusses the role of religious conversion in "'Full Consciousness': Passion and Conversion in *Adam Bede*" (1998), and T. R. Wright explores faith, the existence of God, and the treatment of religion in "*Middlemarch* as a Religious Novel, or Life without God" (1984). For the most part, these critics attend to various psychological and socioreligious aspects of Eliot's writing without making ties to her poetry. "A College Breakfast-Party" (which deals with politics, psychology, and religion), "I Grant You Ample Leave" (which is about ego and consciousness), and "Ex Oriente Lux" (which considers thought and the sublime) are examples of poems that would lend depth to some of the abovementioned analyses; they also merit attention independently for their treatment of these subjects.

views.<sup>28</sup> For example, K. K. Collins looks at the nineteenth-century societal response to Eliot's religious views and writing by exploring what the London religious press said about her when she died in *Identifying the Remains: George Eliot's Death in the London Religious Press*. Several critics look at her relationship to the Bible in their studies on Eliot and religion.<sup>29</sup> Elinor Shaffer provides an example of this approach in her analysis of *Daniel Deronda* wherein she discusses Eliot's views on higher criticism and the treatment of sacred scripture as literature in her book, *'Kubla Khan' and the Fall of Jerusalem: The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature*. These critics rely primarily on her novels in their studies of Eliot and religion.

Charles LaPorte's important work on George Eliot in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature* further probes Eliot's attitudes toward the Bible. He mentions her poetry but relies mostly on her novels to discuss her knowledge of biblical criticism and reliance on the Bible's language and cultural import (dismissing a simple view of Eliot's secularism). LaPorte looks at Eliot's exploration of the historical context for biblical hermeneutics as well as her beliefs about the necessity of having a sacred text, stating: "Eliot strove to express the Bible's influence upon a great variety of religious attitudes: the zealous,

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Hodgson examines Eliot's novels to discuss her postmodern vision of theology and the mystery embedded in her perception of reality in *The Mystery Beneath the Real: Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot* (2000). Marilyn Orr examines Eliot's novels and a few essays to describe the relationship between faith and imagination that informs the aesthetic of Eliot in "Incarnation, Inwardness, and Imagination: George Eliot's Early Fiction" (2009). She points out that the novels feature characters facing religious struggles, and by looking at these struggles, the reader can better understand the progression of Eliot's intellect and faith. Norman Vance compares Eliot's and Thomas Hardy's theological approaches in their novels in "George Eliot and Hardy" which appears in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology* (2007).

<sup>29</sup> Jo Ellen Parker discusses Eliot's use of biblical typology in "A Lesson in Reading: George Eliot and the Typological Imagination," a chapter that appears in *Through a Glass Darkly: Essays in the Religious Imagination* (1996). Alessandra Grego also discusses Eliot's use of biblical typology, exploring *Adam Bede* and *Daniel Deronda*, in her book essay, "George Eliot's Use of Scriptural Typology: Incarnation of Ideas" (2007). Dwight Purdy addresses irony and biblical illusion in "The Wit of Biblical Allusion in *The Mill on the Floss*" (2005).

the lukewarm, the antipathetic, and the utterly indifferent” (536). He also discusses ethics and the Bible (539), the role of the poetess (543), her frequent use of biblical quotations (543), and the influence of evangelicalism and higher criticism on her works (545). LaPorte’s examination of Eliot’s relationship to the Bible is a thorough treatment of one facet of Eliot’s religious sensibility. Such studies which also concentrate on her poetry, including “The Poetess as Prophet” and *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, will provide a more thorough picture of Eliot’s work.

## CONCLUSION

A summary of scholarly criticism of nineteenth-century poetry and the poetess tradition reveals the glaring omission of Eliot from the critical discussion, and a survey of Eliot criticism shows a clear focus on her novels and only a narrow view of her poetry. These critical surveys establish a clear need for further analysis of Eliot’s poetry. By examining Eliot’s poetry in greater depth and probing new angles, Eliot’s readers can gain fuller insight into her work as a whole.

Chapter two will assess aspects of gender: a key element of the poetess tradition. Eliot believed in social progress for women through education and over time. Once liberated by their intellect, she thought, women would gain social power yet retain their feminine uniqueness and voice. For Eliot, femininity was useful for nurturing sympathy between people and as such was key to the betterment of society. Eliot’s writing reveals a passion for women’s struggles, and though female characters in her novels often suffer in unconventional settings and thrive in conventional ones, that is not always the case in her poetry. Some of her poetic heroines speak out against gender inequality and boldly assert

themselves in their male-dominant society. Others quietly assert themselves. In some cases, narrators subtly convey unorthodox messages while presenting a gender normative façade. Eliot's poetry, unlike the majority of her fiction and non-fiction writing, contains non-traditional views on women. Her stance on women writers and feminism sheds light on her reasons and methods for conveying unorthodox views on women in her poetry, and her views on women writers and sexual equality reveal her complex ideas and feelings about gender in nineteenth-century British society. These complex views influenced the way she approached gender issues in poetry. Throughout her works, Eliot promoted sympathy for others, but in her poetry she did so by addressing issues of gender.

Chapter three will explore the religious element of Eliot's poetry. Eliot scholars do discuss her religious background and replacement of orthodox views with an agnostic stance that upholds the sacredness of sympathetic relations. They also trace how these shifts in religious belief inform her works—notably her novels and essays—but a thorough examination of religious influence on her poetry and in relation to her poetess role is still wanting. Chapter three will provide such an examination by discussing the nineteenth-century religious climate in England, Eliot's religious background and de-conversion from Christianity, and the effect of her shifting views on her work, particularly her work as a poet. A careful study of her writing reveals the development of Eliot's belief in sympathy as a replacement for orthodox religious views. As her views matured, she came to see herself as a prophet-poet whose mission it was to teach others that “fellow-feeling” and sympathetic relations (rather than dogma) led to a moral and just society.

Chapter four will focus on Eliot's participation in the poetess tradition. Having established Eliot's views on gender and religion, I will discuss how those views informed her

role as a poet. Like many other nineteenth-century women poets, Eliot relied on poetess conventions that were associated with religion, compassion, and feeling. These associations provided Eliot with an already-established conception which allowed her to promote her unorthodox religious views. By adopting the poetess persona, which carried a sense of traditional religious authority, Eliot could subtly forward her belief in the sacredness of sympathetic relationships. This chapter will investigate Eliot's use of two poetess themes, female community and motherhood, to promote the value of sympathy in society.

Chapter five will conclude, reasserting the case for reclaiming George Eliot's neglected poetry. Understanding Eliot's use of the poetess tradition sheds light on her complex views on gender and religion, including her reliance on a doctrine of sympathy. In her poetry, she expresses views unseen in her fiction, and studying her poetry will provide not only a more complete and accurate view of Eliot's overall work but also a fuller understanding of Victorian women's poetry. In this chapter, I will discuss avenues for future study including examination of poems not covered in this work, overlapping themes in poetry and novels, Eliot's poetic epigraphs, sympathy in her novels versus poetry, and her technique of including poems within poems. Such studies will bring attention to a missing area of critical study in the field of George Eliot scholarship.

## CHAPTER 2

## George Eliot and Gender: Sexual Politics in Poetry

“There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn, than on the ‘Woman Question.’”  
-George Eliot

George Eliot’s elopement signaled a rejection of a traditional domestic lifestyle. Yet she *appeared* traditional in some of her beliefs about women in society. She refused to join the feminist movement, rejecting requests to write for the cause and sign petitions promoting women’s rights. Her stance on the Woman Question frustrated contemporary women’s rights activists as well as future feminist critics. Feminist critics today generally complain about her anti-feminist view and the weak women’s roles in her novels, or they reconcile her position and claim her for feminism because of her liberated lifestyle. Neither of these views is clear-cut, and defining her sexual politics is challenging because her views are not clearly one-sided. For example, she supported women’s education and women’s right to own property but not their right to vote. Similarly, she supported women’s writing but sharply criticized much of it.

Eliot’s writing reveals a mind at work processing her views on sexual equality throughout her lifetime. Her novels and essays provide mostly conventional portraits of and views on women, but her poetry, while appearing to promote traditional middle-class values, reveals more progressive ideas. Poetry offered women writers a unique medium through which to convey subversive messages without inviting censure. By adopting a feminine persona and addressing domestic themes, a woman poet, or poetess, could communicate progressive ideas. As a poetess, Eliot used poetry to work through and express

unconventional ideas about gender in nineteenth-century British society.

## GEORGE ELIOT AND WOMEN WRITERS

Eliot was largely critical of women's writing.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Pinney, in his introduction to "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," cites Eliot's reproach that few women writers "exhibit the subtle penetration into feeling and character, and the truthful delineation of manners which can alone compensate for the want of philosophic breadth in their views of men and things, and for their imperfect knowledge of life outside the drawing-room" (qtd. in Pinney 301).<sup>31</sup> Eliot argued in her essay that "Silly novels by Lady Novelists are a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them—the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic" (301). She criticized women writers for creating unrealistic stories that conform to a particular storyline and called such writing empty and lacking in feeling (303). She especially railed against writers of "oracular" novels, ones that relayed the author's religious, philosophical, or moral beliefs and stated that these women were least able

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<sup>30</sup> Women wrote novels, journalism, letters, travel writing, diaries, self-help books, translation, biographies, history, cookbooks, conduct books, and poetry but approached "serious" works (such as sermons, treatises, political works, and literary pieces that required knowledge of the classics) more cautiously since society deemed such writing less feminine. Women who breeched public expectations for femininity risked being considered immoral. Publishing presented another dilemma for women writers. To publish meant entering the public realm. Printed books were part of the public sphere and invited admiration. As part of the private sphere, women were subject to the male gaze but had to appear to be unaware of it. Women who risked entering the public sphere invited sexualized self-exposure, akin to actresses whom as "public women" society often associated with prostitutes (Mermin xiv). The association of ambition with self-exposure did not hinder writing for women, however. Many avoided self-exposure by publishing anonymously and pseudonymously, and those who published using their names could do so by writing works that society deemed acceptable for women writers. Some women writers advocated (or appeared to advocate) feminine domesticity. The woman writer had scandalous potential since her physical body became conflated with her literary body (Brown 181). If she adhered to domestic ideology, society viewed her as respectable (187). Authors like Elizabeth Gaskell and Felicia Hemans who wrote on domestic themes and lived outwardly traditional lives enjoyed public approval. Conversely, society gossiped about and scandalized non-traditional authors such as Leticia Landon and George Eliot.

<sup>31</sup> Pinney's footnote reads: "*Westminster Review*, LXII, 283. The attribution of this review to George Eliot was made by Gordon S. Haight 'on the basis of style alone' in 'George Eliot's Theory of Fiction', *Victorian Newsletter*, 10 (Autumn, 1956), 1-3."

to impart true knowledge: “the ability of a lady novelist to describe actual life and her fellow-men, is in inverse proportion to her confident eloquence about God and the other world, and the means by which she usually chooses to conduct you to true ideas of the invisible is a totally false picture of the visible” (311). She called for higher standards and harsher criticism of women’s literature so that silly ladies who write out of “busy idleness” would give up writing and thereby stop promoting a fatuous impression of women writers (323).<sup>32</sup>

She did praise women writers whom she thought truly merit-worthy. She greatly respected Harriet Martineau as an authoress (*Letters* 3:201)<sup>33</sup> and admired the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe with whom she exchanged letters from 1869 until her death.<sup>34</sup> With Elizabeth Gaskell she exchanged a few praiseworthy correspondences but remained less impressed with Gaskell’s work than Gaskell with hers. When Gaskell wrote to her upon reading *Adam Bede*, “I never read anything so complete, and beautiful in fiction, in my whole life before” (3:197), Eliot responded with gratitude for fellow sympathy between women artists:

Only yesterday I was wondering that artists, knowing each other’s pains so well, did not help each other more, and, as usual, when I have been talking complainingly or suspiciously, something has come which serves me as a reproof. That “something” is your letter, which has brought me the only sort of help I care to have—an assurance

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<sup>32</sup> Eliot’s isolation from women, her criticism of women’s writing, and her hesitance to form friendships with female authors led women writers to feel slighted by her. Elaine Showalter explains that women writers “thought she had rejected them because she avoided intimacy; they thought she had despised them because she had held them to a rigorous standard” (*A Literature of their Own* 111).

<sup>33</sup> She met Martineau in 1845 and again in 1852. The two became friends, but the friendship ended with Martineau’s disapproval of Eliot’s elopement.

<sup>34</sup> The women never met, as Stowe lived in America, but they periodically enjoyed discussing ideas on religion, philosophy, social justice, and writing in letters.



of fellow-feeling, of thorough truthful recognition from one of the minds which are capable of judging as well as of being moved. You know, without my telling you, how much the help is heightened by its coming to me afresh, now that I have ceased to be a mystery and am known as a mere daylight fact. I shall always love to think that one woman wrote to another such sweet encouraging words—still more to think that you were the writer and I the receiver. (3:198)

Sympathy between women artists for Eliot was rare, and though Gaskell's admiration touched her, she was a critic foremost and as such could not overlook literary limitations. To Mrs. Peter Taylor, she said that "Mrs. Gaskell has certainly a charming mind, and one cannot help loving her as one reads her books" but that her novel *Ruth* "with all its merits will not be an enduring or classical fiction" (2:86). Though she admired and engaged a few women writers, she seldom befriended literary women. Her critical attitude and high standards prevented her from making such connections. Her devotion to writing and desire to see a better quality of women's writing superseded the need to establish friendships with literary women.

Eliot felt that women writers had a responsibility to their readers to present excellent writing from a feminine point of view.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, she had a responsibility to those of her readers who were women writers to reveal failings and encourage better writing. In "Woman in France: Madame De Sablé," Eliot complained that "With a few remarkable exceptions, our

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<sup>35</sup> The situating of middle-class women in the home made writing opportunities attractive to those who were ambitious, restless, or in need of money. Few respectable options were available to middle-class women who needed to earn a living; they could become governesses, paid companions, school keepers, wives, or writers. Writing offered the added benefit of privacy; they could write at home, secretly, and with little expense (Mermin xv). Many women who turned to writing out of financial necessity wrote for mass appeal and not for artistic value. Eliot is complaining about writers who forfeited quality for monetary gain.

own feminine literature is made up of books which could have been better written by men” (*Essays* 53) but also acknowledged women’s unique contribution:

Under every imaginable social condition, she will necessarily have a class of sensations and emotions—the maternal ones—which must remain unknown to man; and the fact of her comparative physical weakness, which, however it may have been exaggerated by a vicious civilization, can never be cancelled, introduces a distinctively feminine condition into the wondrous chemistry of the affections and sentiments, which inevitably gives rise to distinctive forms and combinations. (53).<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the female experience gave the woman writer a sensibility derived from maternal instinct and “sentiments” not available to men; women ought to draw upon their unique resources to provide fresh insight through writing. Eliot also believed that feminine literature could provide beauty and variety:

A certain amount of psychological difference between man and woman necessarily arises out of the difference of sex, and instead of being destined to vanish before a complete development of woman’s intellectual and moral nature, will be a permanent source of variety and beauty, as long as the tender light and dewy freshness of morning affect us differently from the strength and brilliancy of the mid-day sun. (53)

Awareness of such gender differences as the maternal instinct and female sensibility could

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<sup>36</sup> Ermarth explains that the essay’s guiding thoughts are ideas at the heart of Eliot’s work. The first thought “is that society is a homeostatic condition: for better or worse, all parts affect all other parts. Where women are marginalized, ill-educated, and positively confined to a corner and to needlework, their whole culture feels the pang; and conversely, where women have among all citizens an equal opportunity to develop, their culture reaps the reward” (“Woman in France” 443). The second thought “is that every individual makes a difference but that individuals alone do not make conditions: it is an aggregate of women, not just a few exceptionally privileged ones, who make the critical mass that binds society to one course or another. English society in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century supported social practices that excluded women by law from almost any exercise of social, political, and economic rights and responsibilities” (443).

allow women to write uniquely and need not lead them to write unrealistically and poorly. According to Eliot, women who imitated or exaggerated the masculine style (53) or whose approach was a “composite of feminine fatuity” (301) did not properly channel the power of their feminine distinctiveness.

Eliot also attributed successful female writing to higher intellect (*Essays* 55). To attain a higher intellect, she argued in “Woman in France,” women should be allowed to interact more freely with men. French women, for example, were more sympathetic with men than English women because of a “laxity of opinion and practice with regard to the marriage-tie” (56). She argued 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” (56). Furthermore, the practice of salons in France allowed men and women to converse on a broad array of topics and thus helped bolster feminine culture (57).<sup>37</sup> Eliot believed women writers could contribute uniquely to literature if they employed feminine sensibility together with intellect. She advocated less rigid rules of decorum that would allow men and women to interact and experience diverse knowledge. Women confined to the home and to the company of women, by contrast, had no access to masculine perspectives. A life spent discussing needlework, etiquette, dress, manners, marriage, child-rearing, and the behavior of neighbors was limited, and for Eliot such a limited mind should not attempt to influence others through writing.

Silly women writers who falsely presented the feminine voice as idealistic merely for the sake of money or notoriety utterly frustrated Eliot. She showed no patience with those

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<sup>37</sup> In a comparison of English and French women writers, she deemed French women’s writing as superior to English women’s writing because of the French women’s greater intellect.

who wrote without skill and knowledge. She was severe with women writers not simply to degrade them but to prod them to fairly represent their sex. She desired a strong female voice in the public domain. Such a voice that was reflective of a mature mind and a deep understanding of humanity could provide readers with a balanced understanding of human nature and societal needs—including the societal need for greater equality for women. Readers with feminine and masculine perspectives would better understand one another, and this better understanding would lead to greater acts of sympathy.

Eliot lived what she promoted. She broke societal rules of decorum by living outside the bounds of legal matrimony, and she thrived as an intellectual and a writer partly as a result of such a union. Not many women risked sullyng their reputation by associating with a fallen woman and therefore her social world largely consisted of male companionship: Lewes and other guests who read and discussed humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. She gained masculine perspectives by interacting with men and discussing a broad array of topics. While she urged women writers to gain other perspectives and use their intellect and feminine uniqueness to write realistically, she too practiced the art of writing truthfully, sincerely, and sympathetically.

One author who represented ideal feminine writing, in Eliot's opinion, was Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In her review of Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Eliot states:

Mrs. Browning is, perhaps, the first woman who has produced a work which exhibits all the peculiar powers without the negations of her sex; which superadds to masculine vigour, breadth, and culture, feminine subtlety of perception, feminine quickness of sensibility, and feminine tenderness. It is difficult to point to a woman of genius who is not either too little feminine, or too exclusively so. ("Belles Lettres"

306)

Eliot found in Browning's poetry "genuine thought and feeling" (307). She explained that the poem *Aurora Leigh* exhibited no artifice but rather control, thoughtfulness, and a profound awareness of human emotions:

There is no petty striving after special effects, no heaping up of images for their own sake, no trivial play of fancy run quite astray from the control of deeper sensibility; there is simply a full mind pouring itself out in song as its natural and easiest medium. This mind has its far-stretching thoughts, its abundant treasure of well-digested learning, its acute observation of life, its yearning sympathy with multiform human sorrow. (307)

Eliot's praise of Browning's mind showed her insistence on women writers' use of intellect to create sympathetic delineations of the human experience. Charles Laporte points out that Eliot held different standards for women's poetry and women's prose. Laporte cites Eliot's praise of *Aurora Leigh* to assert: "Certainly no tradition of writing in the nineteenth century is more self-consciously feminine than the poetess tradition, and Eliot's review instructs that only through this tradition is Barrett Browning able to blossom into great poetry. Here, seemingly, is the distinctive female influence that Eliot wished to see in the English tradition, and Eliot's poetry propagates that influence" ("Poetess as Prophet" 160). The poetess tradition was more thoroughly feminine than any other writing tradition. But Eliot's comments on women's writing in her essays imply that she wanted women writers of all genres to write with intelligence and feminine sensibility.

## GEORGE ELIOT'S SEXUAL POLITICS

Eliot believed women writers had a particular responsibility to develop intellectually since they were public spokespersons, but she also considered higher intellect a benefit to women in general. She thought that education would eventually lead to social elevation for women but believed that such change should occur slowly and gradually. Although she strongly advocated equal education for women, she was ambivalent about other issues related to the Woman Question. She expressed this ambivalence to Mrs. Nassau John Senior (1869): “There is no subject on which I am more inclined to hold my peace and learn, than on the ‘Woman Question.’ It seems to me to overhang abysses, of which even prostitution is not the worst. Conclusions seem easy so long as we keep large blinkers on and look in the direction of our own private path” (*Letters* 5:58).<sup>38</sup> She indicated that the issue of women’s equality was too complicated for her to take a firm stand, and she could not relate to strident advocates since her own position was unsure.<sup>39</sup> She explained to Mrs. Senior her inability to relate to activists: “I feel too deeply the difficult complications that beset every measure likely to affect the position of women and also I feel too imperfect a sympathy with many women who have put themselves forward in connexion with such measures, to give any

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<sup>38</sup> Joseph Bristow explains that the “woman question” in the nineteenth-century covered many currents of belief concerning women and professional work, suffrage, spinsterhood, prostitution, and women’s roles within the separate spheres ideology (3). Eliot did not explicitly state what she understood “the woman question” to mean. This comment to Mrs. Senior provides the only instance in which she used the expression in her letters. We know that she believed that society should enfranchise women only after they were educated, and we also know that she believed women should have the right to own property. Otherwise, we can only speculate on her views based on her lifestyle, actions, and statements to others.

<sup>39</sup> Though some women were silent and others, like Eliot, refused to take a stand, many were actively rhetorically, addressing public meetings held for promoting temperance and other women’s issues (dress, moral purity, married women’s property rights, domestic abuse, suffrage, etc.). Carol Mattingly explains that hundreds of thousands of women participated in the woman’s movement. Women outside the suffrage movement were considered “conservative.” Scholars often connect women’s conservatism to religion, but many of the women’s rights activists learned their rhetorical skills through working in the church (103).

practical adhesion to them” (5:58). She also expressed her ambivalence to John Morley: “I do not trust very confidently to my own impressions on this subject [female enfranchisement]. The peculiarities of my own lot have caused me to have idiosyncrasies rather than an average judgment” (5:364). By the time she wrote this letter in 1867, Eliot’s fame had finally earned her social standing after years of ostracism. She did not want to call attention to her personal life by advocating publicly. As Elizabeth Ermarth aptly states, “She did not participate in rallies because of a personal life so continuously fraught by the courageous choices she made that her health nearly buckled under the strain; she simply had not the luxuries available to women who, as she said, get what they want by indirection so they can still be invited to dinner” (*Oxford Reader’s Companion* 442).<sup>40</sup> Eliot put her energy into writing and left the rallies to others.

This stance greatly frustrated her activist friends. Her literary success was a draw to the cause, and they appealed to her for support on a range of women’s issues, but she would not lend her backing to the movement. Activist friends Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Parkes pursued her for support, as did Julia Smith, founder of Bedford College; Emily Davies, founder of Girton College; Isa Craig, poet and co-worker at the *English Woman’s Journal*; Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, champion for medical education for women; Mrs. Peter Taylor, Eliot’s longtime friend and correspondent; Florence Nightingale, Bodichon’s cousin; Octavia Hill, campaigner for women’s education; and Caroline Cornwallis, writer and co-contributor

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<sup>40</sup> Eliot suffered from headaches and depression throughout her life. She was deeply sensitive to the opinions and criticisms of others and because she made bold choices for her life, she had to protect herself from more censure than she could physically handle.

to the *Westminster Review*.<sup>41</sup> These women did not succeed in gaining Eliot's full support, but they prompted her to participate in some ways. She signed the Married Women's Property Bill petition, contributed to Girton College and to a fund that enabled Octavia Hill to pursue philanthropic work, and helped Bessie Parkes in her publishing pursuits (Nestor 160-61).<sup>42</sup> These actions show that she favored justice for married women and hoped to see women better educated, more sympathetic toward others, and more talented as writers, but she was reluctant to engage in women's politics because she felt her talent was that of a writer, not that of an activist. She often thought about the issues regarding the Woman Question but stood firmly neither on the side of feminism nor on the side of anti-feminism.

In 1853, Eliot wrote to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor: "Enfranchisement of women' only makes creeping progress; and that is best, for woman does not yet deserve a much better lot than man gives her" (*Letters* 2:86). Such statements have led a number of contemporary feminist critics to express disappointment in what they view as Eliot's anti-feminism. Deirdre David, for example, considers Eliot's stance as capitulation to the male-dominated culture (164). Pauline Nestor offers an alternate explanation; she claims that Eliot's ambivalence was a result of being apolitical and ill-disposed toward activism (162). Karen Chase asserts that she preferred not to engage actively but rather worked out her feelings regarding the Woman Question in her writing (445). These explanations all hold some truth, but key to understanding Eliot's sexual politics is her belief in a meritocratic society based on education

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<sup>41</sup> When Parkes asked her to contribute to the *English Woman's Journal*, Eliot declined, explaining that her "vocation lies in other paths. . . . I expect to be writing *books* for some time to come. . . . It is a question whether I shall give up building my own house to go and help in the building of my neighbour's garden wall" (*Letters* 2:431).

<sup>42</sup> Eliot encouraged Parkes to publish her *Poems* in 1852: "Publish the poems with all my heart, but don't stop there. Work on and on and do better things still" (*Letters* 2:45). She also positively reviewed Parkes's *Gabriel* in *Westminster Review* (Haight 184).



and slow, progressive change.<sup>43</sup> Like other intellectuals of the age, Eliot believed in a shift in societal power from those privileged by gender and class to those who merited power by virtue of intellect. Intellectuals gained power through knowledge and exercised power by writing Truth based on science and reason, untainted by self-interest, and motivated by the good of society, not the good of the individual. Intellectuals such as Eliot thus emphasized literacy and education as means to a better society (see Cottom 4-16). Without equal education, women lacked the intellect to merit power in society.<sup>44</sup> Eliot believed that education for women (and for all people) would result in a more universally enlightened society that would naturally produce a fairer distribution of power. But in her view such a change could not take place quickly and should not be forced but rather should occur slowly.

Her belief in steady progress for women is clear in her comparison of two women's rights activists, Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft, in which she summarizes two typical stances on women's roles:

On one side we hear that woman's position can never be improved until women themselves are better; and on the other, that women can never become better until their position is improved—until the laws are made more just, and a wider field

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<sup>43</sup> George Creeger explains that Eliot's "intense conservatism" is a principle characteristic of her mindset. Her conservatism, he suggests, is the value, amounting almost to piety, she gave to the past; the stress she placed upon duty; the insistence that the passions stood in need of a controlling rationality; the acceptance of change and a belief in progress qualified by a fear that any abrupt wrenching would prove harmful to the structure of society; and the yearning, while in London and at the very heart of the world's greatest mercantile and industrial power, for a preindustrial age she had known as a child among the green fields and hedgerows of rural England. (2-3)

Creeger is right. However, I avoid using the term "conservatism" in this discussion as it evokes political connotations and does not account for Eliot's socially liberal views. To be fair to Creeger, he admits that her conservatism was balanced by (or set of in a state of tension by) strong liberal-reforming tendencies (3).

<sup>44</sup> In *A Short History of Writing Instruction*, Ferreira-Buckley and Winifred Horner explain that prohibitions against female education were based on cultural and biological grounds. There was a common belief that "rigorous study led to infertility and insanity" (204). Furthermore, medical officials warned that women were "ill-equipped to handle the rigors of study" (204).

opened to feminine activity. But we constantly hear the same difficulty stated about the human race in general. There is a perpetual action and reaction between individuals and institutions; we must try and mend both by little and little—the only way in which human things can be mended. (*Essays* 205)

Chase explains Eliot's rejection of quick change in favor of slow progress:

The quick pursuit of a new legal dispensation for women, the insistence on an immediate change in relations of property, the demand for an overturning of the conventions of “separate spheres” for men and women—these hallmarks of a robust new politics struck George Eliot as too hasty and decided. . . . Her mature thought depends on a conception of social life as a living organism that grows and changes only slowly; transformation cannot be willed in a moment; it must be prepared carefully over time. . . . Not a hasty, hurried snatching, it is part of a long, organic process leading perhaps to radical change in the relations of the sexes, but not all at once, and not soon. (445-46)

Eliot believed in progressive change that would not disrupt the usual functioning of society. For Eliot, societal progress for women needed to be slow because it required education—an endeavor which took time. To her friends, she boldly asserted her belief in women's right to equal access to education. She wrote to Mrs. Taylor: “I do sympathise with you most emphatically in the desire to see women socially elevated—educated equally with men, and secured as far as possible along with every other breathing creature from suffering the exercise of any unrighteous power” (*Letters* 4:366). Here she points to education as a means to social elevation and the avoidance of suffering unjust usage of power. She addressed men's fear of women's education by asserting that education promotes harmonious

relationships and healthy families. She wrote to Emily Davies: “[C]omplete union and sympathy can only come by women having opened to them the same store of acquired truth or beliefs as men have, so that their grounds of judgment may be as far as possible the same. The domestic misery, the evil education of the children that come from the presupposition that women must be kept ignorant and superstitious, are patent enough” (4:468). Similarly, to Mrs. Senior she explained that unity among the sexes required education for men and women alike: “[W]omen ought to have the same fund of truth placed within their reach as men have; that their lives (i.e. the lives of men and women) ought to be passed together under the hallowing influence of a common faith as to their duty and its basis. And this unity in their faith can only be produced by their having each the same store of fundamental knowledge” (5:58).

Eliot believed equal education for men and women should eventually lead to social equality, but until women equaled men in knowledge, they did not merit social elevation. Nestor argues that “Eliot’s enthusiasm for women’s education stemmed as much from her disapproval of women as from any sympathy for women’s lot” (162). I disagree. Eliot did not disapprove of women. Her defense of women’s education indicates a desire for intellectual equality that would lead to social elevation. However, intellectual equality would not mean dominance over men. Neither would it mean that women would share masculine gender roles. Rather, women would continue to have their own functions. She explains in “Women in France”:

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 (*Essays* 81).<sup>45</sup>

Eliot affirmed to Emily Davies her belief in the “spiritual wealth acquired for mankind by the difference of function” (*Letters* 4:468), and spoke to the alarm that “women should be ‘unsexed’” by explaining: “We can no more afford to part with that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman’s being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character, than we can afford to part with human love” (4:468).<sup>46</sup> Although she did acknowledge the “special moral influence” that “lies in women’s peculiar constitution” (4:468), she did not believe in the moral or biological superiority of women.<sup>47</sup> She likened the argument for moral superiority (based on the oppression of women) to the argument for virtue (based on enslavement). Oppression does not lead to betterment, she claimed, and such an argument would lead to continued oppression:

Unfortunately, many over-zealous champions of women assert their actual equality with men—nay, even their moral superiority to men—as a ground for their release

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<sup>45</sup> Eliot seems to both uphold and subvert gender essentialist ideas in her writings. She extols the maternal, gentle, sympathetic nature of women while championing equal education and vocational success for women. I do not think Eliot was an essentialist. She believed in the unique qualities and functions of the sexes, but she did not assert that these were fixed traits. Rather, she urged men and women to better understand one another and create a better society through sympathy and fellow-feeling.

<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Uglow states that Eliot believed that more opportunities would “both enhance women’s capacities *and* maintain their ‘precious speciality’, the capacity for sympathy” (71). For Eliot, allowing women a greater voice would invite more sympathetic relations between the sexes and thereby lead to a better society.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth explains: “To claim that women have special powers, solely because they are biologically women, is an argument from magic of the kind George Eliot has no patience with. Such claims trivialize women’s real experience and actively deny them opportunity even to grow up. And this trivialization and this denial is not done only by men, but by women who reinforce the closed circuit of misogynist self-justification” (“Woman in France” 443).

from oppressive laws and restrictions. They lose strength immensely by this false position. If it were true, then there would be a case in which slavery and ignorance nourished virtue, and so far we should have an argument for the continuance of bondage. But we want freedom and culture for woman, because subjection and ignorance have debased her, and with her, Man; for—If she be small, slight-natured, miserable, / How shall men grow?<sup>48</sup> (*Essays* 205)<sup>49</sup>

Eliot believed that women should neither claim superiority over men nor let society reduce them to servitude or limit them to the domestic sphere. Only in an educated society in which all have free access to knowledge can a culture advance and thrive.

## SEXUAL POLITICS AND POETRY

Eliot's view on the advancement of women and society as a whole plays out in her poetry in ways unseen in her fiction.<sup>50</sup> Eliot's poetry reveals more complex attitudes toward gender politics than her novels do. Margaret Reynolds aptly explains in her entry on "the

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<sup>48</sup> This quote is from Tennyson's *The Princess* (175).

<sup>49</sup> Eliot praised activists Fuller and Wollstonecraft for not falling into "sentimental exaggeration," stating: "Their ardent hopes of what women may become do not prevent them from seeing and painting women as they are" (*Essays* 205). A respectful nod to Wollstonecraft was unusual since Wollstonecraft was often used as the example of "where feminism leads." Her suicide attempts and extramarital liaisons were publicized in the memoirs of her husband, William Godwin. Eliot typically did not associate with other fallen women, but her praise of Wollstonecraft was a true testament to her belief in Wollstonecraft's sensibility.

<sup>50</sup> Karen Chase points out that Eliot's origins as a novelist coincided with the beginning of the modern feminist movement and that her hesitance to engage actively in the women's movement was disappointing to feminists then and now. However, she asserts that Eliot's fiction reveals indirect engagement of the Woman Question: "The engagement occurs in her own terms and within the realm of her fictional project, and if it yields no brisk recommendations for public policy, it makes a persistent challenge to the work of narrative" (443). The debates in the 1850s surrounding the laws of divorce and married women's property were going on at the time when Eliot was beginning her literary career, and the contemporary debates crop up throughout her works. As Parliament discussed a legislative response to domestic brutality, "Janet's Repentance" narrated a story of physical abuse of a woman by her husband. As feminists sought to establish a woman's college, Eliot exposed the neglect of Maggie Tulliver's education in *The Mill on the Floss* (444-45). Eliot engaged with women's struggles in her fiction, but she avoided direct vocal forms of politics. She avoided active participation in the women's rights movement partly because she was busy writing books and partly because she viewed the role of artist as separate from the role of advocacy (445).

poetry of George Eliot” in the *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* the opportunity poetry afforded Eliot for exploring her views on gender matters:

In the early days of modern feminist criticism...George Eliot was often seen as an anomaly whose ambivalent political positioning meant that she could not be paraded as a worthy proto-feminist. The fact that she lived out, in private, the radical existence of an independent woman both sexually and intellectually, could not be squared with the fact that, in her novels, women’s lives are often given conventional 19<sup>th</sup>-century conclusions. . . . It is in her poetry, however, once again a form where she seems to have felt herself freer and where she could be more experimental, that George Eliot most fully works out her thinking on sexual politics. Questions to do with the construction of gender and the conventions of contemporary sexual difference dominate in the poetry. (306)<sup>51</sup>

Feminist critics who are disappointed with conservative portraits of women in her novels may be gratified to find critiques of gender roles in her poetry. Eliot makes these critiques

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<sup>51</sup> As a poet, Eliot took liberties she did not take as a novelist. In her novels, she created truthful representations of ordinary people. For the craft of poetry, however, she sometimes embraced idealistic portraits and scenarios. Mathilde Blind explains that having portrayed “the most marvelously truthful delineations of her fellow-men as they are ordinarily to be met with, she now also felt prompted to draw the exceptional types of human character, the rare prophets, and the sublime heroes” (165). Blind explains Eliot’s departure from realism in *The Spanish Gypsy*:

George Eliot’s feeling for the extraordinary and romantic was very subordinate to that which she entertained for the more familiar aspects of our life. For, although she here chose one of the most romantic of periods and localities, the Spain of Ferdinand and Isabella, with the mingled horror and magnificence of its national traditions, she does not really succeed in resuscitating the spirit which animated these devout, cruel, fanatical, but ultra-picturesque times. The Castilian noble, the Jewish astrologer, Zarca, and the Spanish Inquisitor, even the bright gloriously conceived Fedalma herself, think and speak too much like sublimated modern positivists. . . . The poetic mode of treatment corresponds to the exalted theme of ‘The Spanish Gypsy,’ a subject certainly fitted for drama or romance rather than for the novel, properly so called. . . . Here, as in her novels, we find George Eliot’s instinctive insight into the primary passions of the human heart, her wide sympathy and piercing keenness of vision; but her thoughts, instead of being naturally winged with melody, seem mechanically welded into song. This applies to all her poetic work. (166-668)

subtly, though. Most of her poetic heroines embrace values similar to those held by her novelistic heroines; they follow a sense of duty and sacrifice their will for others.<sup>52</sup> Her novelistic themes of self-resignation and suffering lend themselves naturally to poetry as they are also common themes of the poetess. As the poetess does, she finds artful ways to insert non-traditional views into her poetry while appearing to promote middle-class Victorian values. “Brother and Sister,” for example, appears to be a straightforward poem about the love between siblings, but a close reading reveals an unusual challenge to traditional gender roles. Likewise, in “How Lisa Loved the King” she appears to promote the traditional values of feminine obedience and marriage, but simultaneously she makes a very different statement. An in-depth examination of these two poems will reveal how Eliot applies the poetess technique of inserting subversive views while appearing to promote traditional values.

#### ELIOT’S TREATMENT OF GENDER ROLES IN “BROTHER AND SISTER”

In “Brother and Sister,” Eliot commented on traditional gender roles in a story told in a sequence of eleven sonnets. Eliot’s choice of the sonnet form (and sonnet sequence) was strategic.<sup>53</sup> First, the sonnet form allowed her a place to relay a personal story.<sup>54</sup> Eliot

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<sup>52</sup> Armgart is one exception. She speaks out boldly on gender matters; however, by the end of the poem, the heroine has embraced a more feminine stance.

<sup>53</sup> A brief history of the sonnet will give context for Eliot’s use of the form: Petrarch and his followers caused the sonnet form to flourish in fourteenth-century Italy. The English adopted the form in the sixteenth-century, creating new rhyme schemes but keeping its use of amatory sonnet sequences. Milton kept the Italian structure but did not use the amatory context, applying it to political and personal issues. The eighteenth-century produced few sonnets until the end of the century when Della Cruscans and popular poets of sentiment such as Charlotte Smith revived the sonnet form. Wordsworth and Romantic poets used the sonnet form for descriptive and philosophical purposes, and Victorian poets revised and responded to the form in ways largely unnoticed until recently (Houston 247-8).

avoided autobiographical expression in general, and she especially avoided self-display in poetry (as readers tended to make autobiographic assumptions about women poets via their poetry). However the sonnet form was associated with autobiographical truth and expression of feeling and therefore provided a natural place to tell one's story.<sup>55</sup> By choosing the sonnet form, which thematized confinement within both social and poetic rules, Eliot could write her personal experience in a formal, controlled setting.<sup>56</sup> She strictly adhered to the formal rules of the sonnet form to express her feelings of confinement in a sibling relationship that assumed traditional gender roles.<sup>57</sup> Eliot's rigid adherence to form provided a structured

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<sup>54</sup> Eliot wrote two other sonnets. One appears as an epigraph to chapter 57 of *Middlemarch* and recounts the idyllic lives of two children influenced by the stories of Walter Scott. The similarities in theme (childhood unity and eventual separation), imagery (the "thrill" of flower "buds") and language ("lines" and the "little world of [their] childhood) with "Brother and Sister" indicate the likelihood that this sonnet was initially written for the sequence. She also wrote "Sonnet" in 1839, a poem in which the narrator reflects on childhood to express a sense of loneliness and disenchantment with life. Margaret Reynolds correctly notes that "Sonnet" expresses a wish for freedom from societal constrictions (*Oxford Reader's Companion* 305). In the epigraph, "Sonnet" and "Brother and Sister," Eliot uses the sonnet form and the adult narrator reflecting on childhood to protest forms of social confinement.

<sup>55</sup> Wordsworth and his contemporaries repositioned the sonnet to be a site of autobiographical expression. This effort was connected with the rediscovery of Shakespeare's sonnets, which had been critically neglected but then were transformed into the ideal example of the sonnet sequence as disguised autobiography (Phelan 43).

<sup>56</sup> In her article, "Glorification of the Lowly in Felicia Hemans' Sonnets 'Female Characters of Scripture,'" Anne Nichols similarly comments on Hemans's use of the structured sonnet form:

As Hemans began delving more deeply into the male-dominated realm of religious poetry, she turned to the sonnet, a form she had not employed since her inaugural publication, *Poems* (1809).

Accomplished in an impressive variety of stanza forms and poetic genres, Hemans' formal excellence allowed her not only to please readers and impress critics, but also to employ the poetic form that best suited her theme. Sonnet sequences provided a balance of form and freedom: the sonnet form naturally confined her excursions to fourteen-line increments, allowing Hemans the safety of boundaries as she tested the strength and reception of her overtly religious poetry. But the sonnet sequence also provided room for sustained development and significant contributions to religious poetry. (561)

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Phelan points out that Tractarian poet John Keble noted the sonnet form as an appropriate vehicle for autobiography because it allowed one to regulate and disguise emotions. This combining of expressiveness and decorum (known by Keble as "modest reserve") allowed women poets to express themselves in the confines of a rule-bound form (46-47). Phelan states:

The place of the sonnet within the "expressive" poetics underlying the practice of the "poetesses" has not yet been noted. What Isobel Armstrong calls the "aesthetics of the secret," which dominates women's poetry during the early nineteenth century gives rise not only to various forms of masking and displacement (such as the dramatic monologue), but also to the retention of a privileged site of encoded personal utterance in the sonnet. This heavily rule-governed yet apparently spontaneous form allowed women poets to articulate what Dora Greenwell, in revealingly Wordsworthian language,



medium for the story of a young Eliot who faithfully conformed to society's expectations for her but who grew into an independent thinker and writer. Second, the sonnet form allowed Eliot to use her personal experience to make a point of national importance. Critical discussion about the sonnet's rules and qualities shows that the sonnet, above other poetic forms, "connects narratives of literary history with aesthetics at the level of form" (Houston, 247). Nineteenth-century readers connected the structure of the sonnet to national history. Those who argued over the definition of the sonnet appealed to England's cultural and literary history, as represented by the differing major rhyme schemes created by Sidney, Surrey, Shakespeare, and Spenser, to make their claims. Natalie Houston explains:

"Assertions about the national character of the sonnet and its writers were frequently filtered through discussions of rules for the sonnet's form, presenting it as an engine of cultural transmission (and translation) that best operates by principles of exclusion and codification" (247). Thus Eliot's use of a thoroughly English form of poetry (the Shakespearean sonnet rhyme scheme (ababcdcd efefgg) rather than the Italian Petrarchan rhyme scheme (abbaabba cdecde) for "Brother and Sister" to comment on the unfairness of gendered expectations in her sibling relationship represents a call to the nation to reconsider its traditions.<sup>58</sup> She conformed to the strict rules of English sonnet form in telling a story of a girl conforming to, yet questioning, the rules of society that enforce male dominance. By extension, she encouraged English readers also to question such conventions. Finally, the sonnet sequence allowed Eliot to subvert traditional gender expectations by employing a role-reversal

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calls the "Open Secret, free to all who could find its key—the secret of a woman's heart, with all its needs, its struggles, and its aspirations." (47)  
 I will discuss the ideas of masking and displacement at greater length in chapter four.

<sup>58</sup> Variations of the Petrarchan sestet also include cddcdd, cddece, cdcdd, cddcee, cdcdee, cddccd.

technique used by women poets.<sup>59</sup> The love sonnet sequence typically involved a male addressing a female to express his love; however, women poets allowed a female to address a male either to address a lover (as with Elizabeth Barrett Brownings' *Sonnets from the Portuguese*) or to reject a lover (as with Christina Rossetti's "Monna Innominata").<sup>60</sup> Eliot adds her own twist to the love sonnet sequence in having a woman describe her love not for a lover but for her brother. She includes romantic love imagery to describe a sibling relationship, which brings into question the true nature of this traditional relationship. Eliot's use of the confining poetic form appropriately frames the discussion of a relationship struggling within the confines of societal expectations for gendered behavior. The following analysis of "Brother and Sister" will show how such expectations stifled the relationship between a brother and sister but did not stifle the sister's artistic development. The sister learns to free herself from society's rules for gendered behavior and direct her discipline instead to self-discovery and expression through poetry.

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<sup>59</sup> John Holmes notes that women writing sonnets and sonnet sequences in the late nineteenth-century did not follow models of poetry written by women early in the century that explored female identity by directly addressing questions of sexuality and gender. He argues that Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Eliot's "Brother and Sister," and Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* and *Later Life* all fail to provide a model of female selfhood that is frank in sexuality or free from a sense of inferiority. None of these sequences, he argues, explore the possibility of defining female identity through sexuality or apart from masculinity (101). Amy Billone argues that women initiated the revival of the sonnet form in England in the nineteenth-century at a time when women had difficulty entering the lyric tradition. The sonnet form was associated with silence and designed for reading, not performing. Its structural affinity for silence allowed women poets to "investigate and promote gendered interpretations of silence" (3). Women poets needed to find ways to describe the problem of feeling silenced. They wanted to enjoy the same literary status of their male counterparts but they had to mask what they were saying (5-6). The sonnet form allowed them a structured venue for voicing gender-related concerns.

<sup>60</sup> Phelan notes that women found the sonnet sequence a useful form because of "its apparent modesty and humility, its ability to offer them a level playing field, and perhaps most importantly its association with an interior and often secret life of longing and desire." He explains:

Because it necessarily implies some view of the nature of the relationship between men and women, the amatory sonnet becomes particularly contentious in this respect. Both its chivalrous elevation of women to the status of unattainable near-divinities (Dante's Beatrice) and its tendency to objectify the recipient of the poet's attentions (Petrarch's Laura) render it complicit with patriarchy in certain obvious ways, and produce on the part of many women poets a desire to subvert or reverse its habitual gender roles and characteristics. (6)

Based on her own childhood relationship with her brother in rural Chilvers Coton, Eliot's coming of age sonnet sequence follows the idyllic adventures of siblings who spent their days wandering through a meadow, playing along the banks of a canal, fishing, and counting trees.<sup>61</sup> The adult narrator is the sister, and she looks back on her early days with the brother she idolized with fond reminiscence, describing their life in romantic terms while at the same time suggesting the confining nature of a relationship characterized by gender normative behavior and learning. The first sonnet begins: "I cannot choose but think upon the time / When our two lives grew like two buds that kiss / At lightest thrill from the bee's swinging chime, / Because the one so near the other is" (*Poems* 84). At this early point in the poem, the sister appears to describe a young lover with whom she was inseparable. Not until the end of the second stanza does she reveal that the object of her affection is her brother. Eliot not only departs from the traditional sonnet sequence in shifting the focus of the girl's affection to a brother rather than a lover; she also changes the recipient of the address. Rather than speaking to a lover, Eliot's narrator speaks in third person. The sister is speaking to a wider audience. She and her brother, though they shared a happy childhood together, no longer speak; the sister-narrator speaks as an adult to her audience (English readers) to explain why the relationship ended. So, while the traditional address-to-lover sonnet

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<sup>61</sup> The unusually autobiographical poem depicts meadowlands, rookery oaks, and a canal with barges (all descriptions of Eliot's childhood surroundings), a young girl's love for her brother whom she followed around (Eliot idolized her brother Isaac), her frightening encounter with a gypsy (such as when young Eliot was frightened by a gypsy near her home), and their separation by school (school parted Eliot and Isaac at ages five and eight). Eliot's novel *Mill on the Floss* also details the lives of two siblings, Maggie and Tom Tulliver, who grow up in a rural setting. The novel, like the poem, depicts the tension between the siblings due to the sister's non-conformity to gender rules and the brother's disapproval. The novel concludes with the death of the reunited siblings, and the poem concludes with a divorce and a liberated sister-poet. Eliot spoke out on gender matters more freely in her poetry because her poetry presented the material in a less overt manner. Aware of the fact that novels were more thoroughly scrutinized for immoral content, Eliot felt safer to develop these themes more discreetly, through verse.

sequence views the sequence as mediating a relationship, Eliot's address-to-brother sequence narrates a finished relationship. At the outset of the first sonnet the narrator also makes clear the confining nature of the sibling relationship. The sister is forced by her memory ("I cannot choose but think upon the time") to tell of the elder brother who defined boundaries and set limits for their life together (84). She describes him in terms of measurements—he was exactly "forty inches"—and explains how his path determined hers: "I the girl that puppy-like now ran, / Now lagged behind my brother's larger tread" (84). In her youthful perception, her brother not only designated their daily path, but he also defined the boundaries of all knowledge:

I held him wise, and when he talked to me  
 Of snakes and birds, and which God loved the best,  
 I thought his knowledge marked the boundary  
 Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest. (84)

She unquestioningly obeyed the commands of her God-like brother: "If he said 'Hush!' I tried to hold my breath / Wherever he said 'Come!' I stepped in faith" (84). In the first sonnet and throughout the sonnet sequence, the narrator measures the events by time: "Long years" (84), "Blest hours" (85), "my sunny day" (86), "Those hours" (86), "the still hours" (87), "Those long days" (87), "one whole minute" (88), "those brief days" (89), "that early time" (90), "the dire years" (90), etc. Eliot's repetition of measurements of time and her use of meter and rhyme (iambic pentameter and the sonnet rhyme scheme) reinforce the idea that the sister was happy but trapped in a relationship marked by gender boundaries. Controlled by her brother who was taught to rule over her, she was content in her youthful ignorance.

Sonnet two further develops the theme of confinement and also introduces a writing motif. The sister-narrator, now old, writes that “Long years have left their writing on my brow,” reminding the reader that a wiser woman is writing the poem (84). She describes how the young siblings “wandered toward the far-off stream / With rod and line” (84). The wandering, also referred to as “rambling” (86) suggests a freedom the sister enjoys in nature that was different from the pathway laid out by the “brother’s larger tread” (84), the “trodden ways” their mother bade them keep, and the “firm stepping-stones” where the brother guided the sister with a “measuring glance” (89). The “rambling” and “stream” also represent the flow of words of the narrator as she learns the balance between rambling thought and ordered discourse in telling her story. The sister, aware of her brother’s greater power because of his sex, states with happy resignation that they set off on their journey with a basket “Baked for us only, and I thought with joy / That I should have my share, though he had more, / Because he was the elder and a boy” (84). Conscious of the “loving difference of girl and boy,” she acceded to her older brother’s power. They each acted according to their own sexual function. Sister learned to obey, and brother learned to master. Even though their relationship was not equitable, she was happy in “those blest hours of infantine content” (85) because in her youthful innocence she did not know any other way. The rod and line that the siblings take to fish with have a symbolic as well as practical function. The rod (a biblical term for offspring) and line (meaning lineage) remind the reader of the blood connection that binds the siblings, while also hinting at an impending separation between the two, as the sister associates the rod (also a unit of measurement and an instrument of punishment) with her

brother and the line (also words in a poem) with herself.<sup>62</sup> Her brother will learn to measure out punishment when the sister does not follow his path, and the sister will learn to write lines as she pursues her independent course.

The sister reveals her inclination to wander beyond the confinements of the “meadow-path” in sonnets three and four (85-86). She takes an interest in the “dark rooks [that] cawing flew, / And made a happy strange solemnity, / A deep-toned chant from life unknown to me” (85). The birds fly freely above the fixed meadow-path and sing of an unknown world. Similarly, flowers “with upturned faces gazing drew / My wonder downward, seeming all to speak / With eyes of souls that dumbly heard and knew” (86). With its strange music and mysterious knowledge, nature draws her attention from the pathway laid out by her brother. She begins to see that her brother is not the sole source of knowledge but that she can find truth in the wild. However, the sister learns that sometimes venturing beyond the safe pathways of life can be dangerous. Passing a thicket of trees, “where wild things rushed unseen,” she notices “black-scathed grass [that] betrayed the past abode / Of mystic gypsies, who still lurked between / Me and each hidden distance of the road” (86). The “dark smile” of a gypsy and the “dark rooks” that fly above her elicit curiosity about and fear of the unknown. Treading from the pathway, she fears, may lead to dangerous consequences, yet the allure is powerful.

Sonnet five relates the tension that develops in the sibling relationship as a result of pursuing different courses. Along their meadow-path, brother and sister are “schooled in deepest lore” and “learned the meanings that give words a soul / The fear, the love, the

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<sup>62</sup> The rod also represents a walking stick or shepherd’s staff, as in “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). Thus the rod has the potential to comfort as well as punish.

primal passionate store, / Whose shaping impulses make manhood whole” (86). For the brother, the shaping impulses are societally determined, and they make “manhood” (humanity) “whole” (united).<sup>63</sup> He learns to fear the unknown, that which lies outside societal boundaries, and to love conformity. He loves by leading and commanding, and the little sister loves by following and obeying. However, the sister reveals a tendency to seek knowledge and love from outside sources. She begins to discover that there is life beyond the brother’s societally-constructed boundaries. Her shaping impulses come not only from society but also from the natural world, and she in turn gives shape to the “meanings” (truths) she learns by writing the poem about her thoughts on society’s pressure to conform to gender roles. The impulses that shape her into an independent thinker and writer make her whole in a way that is different from her brother’s experience of wholeness. Her adult decisions to deviate from society’s gender-bound rules disqualify her from the wholeness and unity that society offers. However, she will experience a completeness that comes with living life in a way that is true to oneself. The sister-narrator uses the words “love,” “loving,” and “primal passionate store” to remind the reader that the relationship between the brother and sister was once so close that she compared it to a romantic relationship. In their youth, they loved one another by following societal expectations for their genders. But the adult sister interjects a disapproving comment to discredit such a love that depends on societal conformity:

For who in age shall roam the earth and find

Reasons for loving that will strike out love

With sudden rod from the hard year-pressed mind?

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<sup>63</sup> Eliot tended to use masculine pronouns to describe humanity (mankind) and humans (he/him). In this case, however, her use of “manhood” instead of “humanity” or even “mankind” may imply that the “wholeness” experienced benefits men more than women.

Were reasons sown as thick as stars above,  
 'Tis love must see them, as the eye sees light:  
 Day is but Number to the darkened sight. (86)

The sister questions the validity of a love that depends on her conforming to a set of rules. Her reasons for loving (seeking truth outside rules made by others) cause her brother to cancel his love for her with “sudden rod from [his] hard year-pressed mind.” The “rod,” once a symbol of childhood fishing fun, harmony, and oneness through birth and blood, now represents an instrument of punishment. The brother’s adult “mind” (way of thinking) has been “year-pressed” over time by tradition and now is hard and unable to perceive reasons for loving that do not conform to its rigid set of rules.<sup>64</sup> As a youth, she viewed her brother’s knowledge as marking the boundary “Where men grew blind, though angels knew the rest,” but as an adult, she learns that he is not enlightened but rather lives in the dark in matters of truth and love (84, 86). For the adult sister, true love naturally understands reasons for loving “as the eye sees light” (86). By contrast, because of his “darkened sight,” the brother sees that “Day is but Number” (86). In other words, life (“Day”) based on a collection of rules (“Number”) for loving is meaningless. The statement has literary implications for the sister-poet as well. According to the *OED*, “but” can be used to mean “void of” and “number” can signify “metrical periods or feet; lines, verses” or “harmony; conformity, in verse or music, to a certain regular beat or measure; rhythm.” The sister is saying that for the unenlightened person, life is devoid of poetry and true harmony. The brother’s decision to love according to societal rules means that his life will have only the appearance of order. He will attain

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<sup>64</sup> Another reading of this sonnet involves contrasting the ease of loving spontaneously in childhood with the difficulty of loving in the harsh, indifferent world of adulthood.



societal acceptance but will not understand how to love truly. The sister's decision to love outside of traditional boundaries means that she will live poetically and in harmony with her choices but will suffer for her lack of social conformity. This sonnet may be a comment on Eliot's choice to love Lewes and the consequence of society's and her brother's rejection of her based on that decision. Eliot blames the lack of harmony in her sibling relationship to Isaac's stubborn way of thinking and his inability to understand her reasons for loving Lewes. This sonnet gives a taste of the poem's divisive conclusion.

In sonnet six, the narrator explores the unknown world of nature beyond the familiar spots of the brother's path. She "sat in dreamy peace" on the banks of the "brown canal [that] was endless to my thought" and escaped into a world of imagination where barges rounded a "grassy hill to me sublime / With some Unknown beyond it, wither flew / The parting cuckoo toward a fresh spring time" (87). Intrigued by the unknown destinations of the rooks and cuckoos and the mysterious lives of the gypsies and the flowers with "eyes of souls," she seeks out unfamiliar territory, takes ownership of hidden, private places that are hers only. Moments in nature alone with her imagination shape her. These hours, she explains, "Were but my growing self, are part of me, / My present Past, My root of piety" (87). The repetition of "my" and "me" indicates an awareness of an independent development apart from her brother with whom she once felt her life was inextricably entwined, and her use of the word "piety" implies an obedience to another source of devotion: her writing. She will turn from obedience to her brother and compliance to society's rules for decorum and will instead rely on her own knowledge of the world, love, and art to live her life. She will learn to apply rules not merely to outward behavior but to art. The narrator will use the discipline she learned from her brother and her self-guiding imagination to craft powerful lines of poetry that have

the ability not only to conform to rules and not only to express her fancy but that also have the power to make statements of national importance. By learning to write poetry and developing her art, Eliot creates a poem that transcends time, records personal history, and makes a condemnatory comment on a social injustice in nineteenth-century British life.

Sonnets seven and eight return to the theme of writing as they tell of an incident in which the sister learns a lesson in judgment and irony:

Those long days measured by my little feet  
 Had chronicles which yield me many a text;  
 Where irony still finds an image meet  
 Of full-grown judgments in this world perplex. (87)

The narrator again reminds the reader that she is writing a poem and confining herself to the rules of poetry-writing. The chronicles of her life provide material for “many a text” that she measures by “little feet” (87), and she will tell of an ironic incident that will show the confusing way in which people in society judge one another (87).<sup>65</sup> “Full-grown judgments” also refer to her own judgments that she will render now that she is no longer “little” but “Full-grown.” One day, her brother puts her in charge of fishing while he looks for bait, and she obeys his command to “mind the rod” (87) for as long as she can; then her own desire to escape into the unknown world overpowers her will to please her brother:

Proud of the task, I watched with all my might,  
 For one whole minute, till my eyes grew wide,

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<sup>65</sup> Laura Mandell asserts: “Poetry written in the tradition of ironic simplicity contrasts directly with the overwrought transparency of poetry written by the poetess. In my view, at least, it is difficult to find irony in poetess poetry, and to do so leads to strained readings” (24). However, as my discussions of “Brother and Sister” and “Lisa” will show, Eliot clearly employs irony. Perhaps Mandell is correct and Eliot is an exception. A fuller study of irony in the works of poetesses is needed to refute or substantiate Mandell’s claim.

Till sky and earth took on a strange new light  
 And seemed a dream-world floating on some tide—  
 A fair pavilioned boat for me alone  
 Bearing me onward through the vast unknown. (88)

Her will to obey only lasts “one whole minute,” and then her powerful imagination takes her on a solo journey to a free and unknown world. However, by happy accident, she catches a fish and receives rich social reward as a result:

My guilt that won the prey,  
 Now turned to merit, had a guerdon rich  
 Of hugs and praises, and made merry play,  
 Until my triumph reached its highest pitch  
 When all at home were told the wondrous feat,  
 And how the little sister had fished well.  
 In secret, though my fortune tasted sweet,  
 I wondered why this happiness befell. (88)

Ironically, her disobedience earns her praise. As a child, this is confusing. As an adult, she understands that her imagination was stronger than her will to obey and that she could only gain reward by luck.<sup>66</sup> She uses her “lines” to describe this incident to show that judgments

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<sup>66</sup> The gardener points out that the sister had “luck” in catching the fish (88). He whose job it is to make order of disorder in the natural world understands the disparity between wildness and conformity. He knows it can only be by luck that the imaginative child could win praise for obedience. Eliot uses the garden motif throughout to accent the theme of boundaries. Margaret Reynolds equates the garden of their childhood landscape to the Garden of Eden and the brother (who named the animals, held the knowledge, and plucked the fruit from the high tree for the little sister) to God or Adam. The conventional mother and brother in the poem ruled the little sister who “disturbs the untroubled surface of her poem by reading beyond this idyllic landscape” (*Oxford Reader’s Companion* 306). Reynolds does not comment on why she perceives the mother as

are not always sound or necessarily based on truth. The adult Eliot can thus say that situations are complicated and not always easy to judge. To those who negatively judge her writing and her non-conforming lifestyle, she uses this ironic situation to point out their short-sighted impressions.

Whereas in sonnet one the narrator emphasizes oneness and unity in the sibling relationship, in sonnets nine and ten, she emphasizes differences. They grew up in the very same world in which they learned to behave according to gender differences:

We had the self-same world enlarged for each  
 By loving difference of girl and boy:  
 The fruit that hung on high beyond my reach  
 He plucked for me, and oft he must employ  
 A measuring glance to guide my tiny shoe  
 Where lay firm stepping-stones. (88)

The brother understands that his role is to help, guide, and rule over his sister. He considers it his responsibility to guide his sister along the correct path in life, and by fulfilling his masculine function, he shows her kindness: “This thing I like my sister may not do, / For she is little, and I must be kind” (89). The word, “kind,” also can mean “of the same sex” and “innate, inherent,” which implies that the brother is simply acting as a boy when he tells his sister what to do. The brother learns to master the sister and tries to control her impulses:

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conventional, but the passage about the mother does depict a traditional mother at home caring for and watching after her children:

Our mother bade us keep the trodden ways,  
 Stroked down my tippet, set my brother's frill,  
 Then with the benediction of her gaze  
 Clung to us lessening, and pursued us still  
 Across the homestead to the rookery elms (*Poems* 85)

“Thus boyish Will the nobler mastery learned / Where inward vision over impulse reigns, / Widening its life with separate life discerned (89). The boy’s “Will” and “inward vision” reflect a supposedly natural, male tendency to reign over the sister’s impulses. However, his “shaping impulse” is not innate but societal (86). His “Will” (desire) to rule his sister is reinforced by society’s teaching boys to master girls and the enjoyment of the power in doing so. By reining her into safe, societal standards, he exercises the “nobler mastery” (“noble” by society’s standards) (89). The will to master becomes greater with the exercise of domination. Thus, as the brother performs his sexual function, he becomes aware of the “separate,” smaller life of his sister and begins to define his life as greater by its distinctiveness from hers. The sister-narrator implies that society teaches boys that their ability or desire to dominate girls is innate and separates them as a superior class, thus creating a false dichotomy: “A Like unlike, a Self that self restrains” (89). Eliot likely borrows the expression “Like unlike” from Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, book two, chapter five (entitled “Romance”), in which the narrator-editor (arguably Carlyle himself) recounts the story of Teufelsdröckh, a German professor, who at this point in the narrative is a lost and heart-broken wanderer, looking to discover the meaning love and life:

“If in youth,” writes he once, “the Universe is majestically unveiling, and everywhere Heaven revealing itself on Earth, nowhere to the Young Man does this Heaven on Earth so immediately reveal itself as in the Young Maiden. Strangely enough, in this strange life of ours, it has been so appointed. On the whole, as I have often said, a Person (Person-lichkeit) is ever holy to us; a certain orthodox Anthropomorphism connects my Me with all Thees in bonds of Love: but it is in this approximation of the *Like and Unlike*, that such heavenly attraction, as between Negative and Positive, first

burns-out into a flame. Is the pitifullest mortal Person, think you, indifferent to us? Is it not rather our heartfelt wish to be made one with him; to unite him to us, by gratitude, by admiration, even by fear; or failing all these, unite ourselves to him? But how much more, in this case of the *Like-Unlike!* Here is conceded us the higher mystic possibility of such a union, the highest in our Earth; thus, in the conducting medium of Fantasy, flames-forth that fire-development of the universal Spiritual Electricity, which, as unfolded between man and woman, we first emphatically denominate LOVE.” (107, emphasis added)

In this passage, Carlyle’s narrator associates the romantic union between woman and man with the God-human connection, attesting to the holiness of human love, and concluding that such a disparate connection is what makes humanity complete. Eliot adopts Carlyle’s phrase, “Like-Unlike,” to state the case that the brother and sister, though of different sexes, share a blood connection and an innate capacity to love one another. The “Self that self restrains” refers to the brother’s behaving according to society’s rules of decorum and also to his attempts to restrain his sister, whom he should consider a part of himself but does not because of his superior attitude. The brother’s separating himself from the sister, because of a false belief in his own superior nature, results in a catastrophic and unnecessary chasm. In the lines that follow, the sister-narrator remarks ironically that her brother’s “years with others must the sweeter be / For those brief days he spent in loving me” to point out that the brother must depend on the childhood love he shared with her to love a woman as an erotic partner later in life (89). This love, based on subjection, will not really be sweeter for others or for himself since he has learned a false notion of love. The siblings’ once close relationship (that was earlier described in romantic terms) will divide unnaturally due to society’s destructive

indoctrination. Just as Carlyle's narrator promises to tell a story that will benefit his British readers, Eliot's narrator too repeatedly provides moral commentary for her British audience.

In sonnet ten, the sister-narrator confirms her decision to pursue truth in love and art by showing that she made every effort to conform to societal expectations but that such efforts were impossible. She explains that as a child, she identified with, worshipped, and lovingly followed her brother. She “knelt with her brother at marbles” and “marked his fling” and “watched him winding close the spiral string / That looped the orbits of the humming top” (89). These moments of submissive interaction in which she watched her brother and assisted his play were happy though she was the subordinate and passive player. For love of her brother, she tried to suppress her day-dreaming escapist tendencies (which she knew would not always end luckily as in the fish-catching incident) and submit to the more realistic and fixed set of traditional gender roles:

Grasped by such fellowship my vagrant thought  
 Ceased with dream-fruit dream-wishes to fulfil;  
 My æry-picturing fantasy was taught  
 Subjection to the harder, truer skill  
 That seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line,  
 And by “What is,” “What will be” to define. (89)

Her use of the word “grasped” indicates the forced nature of the sibling relationship. She had to do what was expected of her in order to receive love, and doing so meant forcing herself to subdue her natural tendency to imagine other worlds. But clues in the passage indicate the impossibility of subduing her will and thus winning her brother's love. The final three lines of this sonnet present two alternate yet agreeable readings. First, the “harder, truer skill” (89)

that her “vagrant thought” (imagination) was subjected to can refer to the brother’s skill of mastering. In this case, “harder” means rigid, as in the “hard” and “year-pressed” mind of the brother (86), and “truer” is used to mean legitimate and correct. The sister uses “truer” in this sense ironically to state that though society accepts the brother’s skill of mastering as rightful and in accordance with the rules, the narrator does not. This skill for the brother “seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line, / And by ‘What is,’ ‘What will be’ to define (89). According to the *OED*, “line” can refer to “course of action, procedure, life, thought, or conduct.” Thus, the brother creates a “thought-tracked” (calculated, measured) line (course of life, way of thinking) with his “deeds” (actions, conduct), and he defines “What will be” (the future) by “What is” (the present). In other words, the brother measures life by one’s actions and believes that one’s present actions determine their future worth (and reputation). Or, he sees the future way of the world as conforming to the present way of the world as he understands it. He will, therefore, judge his sister’s non-compliance to gender-normative behavior and pursuit of truth outside the bounds of propriety as impossibly incorrect and irrevocably unforgivable in the short and long term. The second way to understand these final lines is to read the “harder, truer skill” as the sister’s skill of obedience (in which case the word “harder” means difficult and the word “truer” is again used ironically) to the brother’s domination and the suppression of her imagination. This skill aims to do the impossible; it “seeks with deeds to grave a thought-tracked line, / And by ‘What is,’ ‘What will be’ to define” (89). In this case, “line” refers to poetry, and the sister is saying that it is impossible to “grave” (engrave or write) a “thought-tracked” (imaginative yet measured) line of poetry with “deeds” instead of words. And it is equally impossible for her to define “What will be” (the future) by “What is” (the present) through her conduct. The sister realizes the



incompatibility of exploring truth through imagination and falling into line with a set of gendered expectations. She also sees that seeking love based on a code of conduct is futile. In order to develop into the artist she will become, the sister must set her own limits for her life and writing and understand that following a path that is not true is not only destructive but also impossible. The only way the sister-poet can define “What will be” by “What is” is through words, not deeds. The sister can write poetry that foresees the future by describing a “childhood-world” in which she discovers her poetic capacity by freeing herself from the stressful restrictions set by others. Eliot’s comment in this passage is likely autobiographical. Isaac’s rejection of her throughout the years she spent with Lewes, and his reuniting with her briefly only after her lawful marriage to Walter Cross two years after Lewes’s death and near the end of her life, demonstrates his recalcitrant mindset and willingness to forgo a lifetime of loving relations with his sister over an issue of conduct. Eliot’s pursuing a life path that did not align with Isaac’s caused her pain but afforded her the opportunity to thrive as a writer. Lewes affirmed Eliot’s personhood by loving her without condition, and he encouraged her art. For her, the loss was worth the gain.

Sonnet eleven concludes predictably with the siblings’ separation. The sister states that school (or, learning the lessons described in the earlier sonnets) parted them and thereafter they “never found again / That childish world where our two spirits mingled / Like scents from varying roses that remain / One sweetness, nor can evermore be singled” (90). Again, the narrator describes the former relationship in romantic terms, likening their inseparability to one combined scent from two roses. She explains that the “twin habit of that early time / Lingered for long about the heart and tongue” (90). The “twin habit” that allowed them to be close as youths—his dominance and her submission—provided her many

moments on which to ponder, discuss, and write. These lessons learned in youth now provide material for her poetry writing: the “dear accent” of the “one happy clime” to “our utterance clung” (90). The reader can only imagine what the brother has to say about the early lessons he learned. The sister, on the other hand, has a voice. In writing the poem, she calls the reader to listen to her story and to sympathize with her view that one must create one’s own boundaries in life and not reject or judge based on differences. The experiences of her youth impressed the sister-poet with “its dear accents” (marks), and she recreates those “accents” with the rhythm of her poetry. She draws attention to her ability to stress meaning with meter by altering the poem’s predominantly iambic pentameter to trochaic pentameter:

Yet the twin habit of that early time  
 Lingered for long about the heart and tongue:  
 We had been natives of one happy clime  
 And its dear accent to our utterance clung. (90)

By dramatically altering the meter at the moment of discussing “accent” and “utterance,” she shows the control she has over her poetry. Her careful self-confinement, demonstrated by the skillful use of and deviation from iambic pentameter, reveals an ability to express feelings and move others to feel with her in a controlled setting. After self-confidently asserting control over her own world, she concludes, inevitably, with a divorce: “Till the dire years whose awful name is Change / Had grasped our souls still yearning in divorce” (90).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Awful “Change” also makes an appearance in “The Legend of Jubal” when Jubal returns to his land of origin after a long journey. Hoping to find familiarity and reconnect with his community and impart the wisdom he gained from his journey, Jubal instead meets “dread Change” (108). For Eliot, change is often painful, but she realizes that with it can come greater knowledge and clarity of vision. She favors gradual change rather than abrupt, jarring change for society, and her many references to the past and memory in her poetry reveal her wistfulness for lost innocence and simplicity.

The narrator once again uses the word “grasped” to indicate the wrenching nature of the “divorce.” No longer “grasped” by the fellowship of her brother, the sister was freer to explore new worlds, truth, love, and art independently of the brother’s boundaries. Her use of passive voice in this stanza emphasizes the inevitability of the severance of the relationship. Dreadful years “shaped them [their souls] in two forms that range / Two elements which sever their life’s course” (90). Simply read, this passage refers to two people who are shaped differently and go their separate ways. This reading implies that “forms” (behavior according to the rules of decorum) played a role in their separation. An alternate reading involves a literary image. According to the *OED*, “form,” “range,” and “element” all have meanings that relate to printing. “Form” refers to “a body of type, secured in a chase, for printing at one impression;” and “range” means “to make straight or level; to make (type) lie flush at the ends of successive lines, to align;” and “element” signifies “the letters of the alphabet. Hence, the rudiments of learning, the ‘A, B, C’; also, the first principles of an art or science.” The image is that of two texts embodying contrasting sets of learning that are side-by-side and completely separate. The author originally prepared the texts for a singular function, but their incompatible principles “sever their life’s course” (90). The siblings no longer share a “course” in life, and as a result they do not share discourse. Both find their own paths in life based on their own understanding of truth. Such separation is bitter-sweet for the narrator, who concludes, “But were another childhood-world my share, / I would be born a little sister there.” Reynolds explains that these lines reveal a “subversive side” of the sequence. She quotes the final two lines of the poem and asks: “Does it mean that she would actively like to play the role of the little sister? Or does it mean that, unfortunately, she will inevitably be treated as the little sister because that is indeed ‘the woman’s lot’?” (306). Reynolds is right

in suggesting that Eliot is questioning the lot of the little sister because she is a girl. Eliot is also saying, however, that she does not regret her “childhood-world” because it taught her how to define her own life by seeking truth independently. Eliot chose a life that others, including Isaac, considered unnatural when she united with Lewes. As a result, she and her brother divorced. In the poem, she depicts a sibling relationship in which codes of conduct determine love as unnatural. She learns to translate past female obedience to present poetic obedience, and she learns the value of boundaries and discipline, but not of those set by others. As an adult poet, she “engraves” the past with clarity, authority, and control, within the confines of the metered sonnet form and within the confines of a marriage that she recognizes as more legitimate than many legal marriages, and she produces a “thought-tracked line” that will guide future readers who are open to its direction.

#### ELIOT’S TREATMENT OF MARRIAGE IN “HOW LISA LOVED THE KING”

Whereas “Brother and Sister” deals with a sibling relationship, “How Lisa Loved the King” (1869) concerns a marriage relationship. “Lisa” has received almost no critical attention despite its unusual treatment of topics of interest in the nineteenth-century and today: marriage and women’s limited choices in society.<sup>68</sup> Adapted from the seventh tale of the tenth day of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* (1353),<sup>69</sup> the poem relates the story

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<sup>68</sup> I have not found a discussion of the poem. Margaret Reynolds briefly mentions “Lisa” in her entry on Eliot’s poetry in the *Oxford Reader’s Companion*. In her discussion of Eliot’s connected web of images related to poetry, music, self-expressiveness, and breath, she mentions the use of a minstrel to convey a poem in “Lisa” (305). She does not examine the poem, however. Van den Broek provides useful background including Eliot’s interest in Boccaccio and her publication information but does not analyze the work (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:137-41). His invaluable two-volume work does not claim to analyze works but to provide the text of all of Eliot’s shorter poems with background information including textual variants and editorial notes.

<sup>69</sup> Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* includes 100 stories (novellas) told over ten days by ten young people. The medieval allegorical work is a frame tale in which the omniscient narrator mediates and intrudes upon the

of a common girl who falls in love with a king, secretly pines for him until she nearly dies, expresses her love, and then earns his attention in the form of his arranging her marriage to another man, Perdicone.<sup>70</sup> Eliot's choice of a tale that reverses the gender expectations of the medieval convention of courtly love is significant.<sup>71</sup> In Boccaccio's poem (and in Eliot's version), a *man* (King Pietro / Pedro) attracts the admiration of a *woman* (Liza / Lisa) at a holiday tournament in thirteenth-century Italy.<sup>72</sup> It is Lisa, not the man, who worships from afar, languishes, and declares her love. Lisa is the hero, and her virginity and obedience are her "heroic virtues" (*Poems* 67). Eliot magnifies the courtly love aspect of Boccaccio's poem and adds epic elements not found in *The Decameron* to increase the ironic effect of Lisa's arranged marriage.

Eliot keeps Boccaccio's storyline intact, but she makes extensive changes to give her

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fictional world of storytelling. Another likely influence for her work was William Morris' best-selling poem *The Earthly Paradise* that she and Lewes were reading when she wrote "How Lisa Loved the King" (*Letters* 4:450). She admired the work and corresponded with Morris, thanking him for sending a presentation copy of his work with an inscription to Eliot in 1870 (8:472). She also met him on at least one occasion (9:219). Modeled on *The Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, *The Earthly Paradise* features a group of pilgrims who seek an earthly paradise where they can attain immortal life. They tell stories of love and feature kings and knights who seek fame. The pilgrims in the tales experience a sense of displacement and disillusionment.

<sup>70</sup> The name Perdicone relies on the Italian word "perdita" which means lost (*OED*). This might imply that Lisa's marriage to Perdicone will result in a loss of identity for Lisa.

<sup>71</sup> The concept of courtly love began in the twelfth century among the troubadours of southern France and then spread into surrounding countries. The origin of courtly love is found in the writings of the poet Ovid who described courtly love as sensual and extramarital and as a kind of warfare which required deceiving the lady. The lover watched all night before his lover's doors, underwent hardships, performed absurd actions, became pale, thin, and sleepless, and incited her jealousy. Over time, Ovid's conception of courtly love was combined with other elements and expanded. (Capellanus 3-6). According to Barbara Tuchman, the stages of courtly love include: "worship through declaration of passionate devotion, virtuous rejection by the lady, renewed wooing with oaths of eternal fealty, moans of approaching death from unsatisfied desire, heroic deeds of valor which won the lady's heart by prowess, consummation of the secret love, followed by endless adventures and subterfuges to a tragic denouement" (67). E. Talbot Donaldson believes that the troubadours shared a tendency to sublimate their love into something higher and nobler (157). The story of Lisa includes: extramarital love, hardship of the lover, worship from afar, declaration of devotion, virtuous rejection, moans of approaching death, and the lovers' sublimation of love.

<sup>72</sup> Sicily "welcomed" Spanish King Pedro who freed Palermo from the "yoke / Of hated Frenchmen" (64). Lisa was one Italian subject "of no noble line" (*Poems* 65).

version an epic quality, while also enhancing the role-reversed courtly love context, to repurpose the story.<sup>73</sup> Eliot's poem, though much longer than Boccaccio's, is too short to be an epic. The length clues readers to the fact that the poem is only like an epic, not a real one. Also, Lisa's sex and common birth disqualify her from being an actual courtly lover and epic hero. Eliot's narrator mentions early in the tale that the tournament at festival feels like an "epic song" that "greatly tells the pains that to great life belong" (64) to hint that the tale will be *like* an epic without actually being one. The description of the "mock terror" (64) and "warlike feigning" (81) of the tournament reminds the reader of an element of play in the story. The poem, like the tournament, is a great show that offsets a real message about marriage. As characters play courtly love roles and hold mock tournaments, they draw attention to the values of chivalry. Similarly, Eliot creates a sort of mock epic to draw attention to and criticize old-fashioned habits and values related to marriage. On the surface, the poem ennobles marriage, but a closer examination of Eliot's epic additions reveals a view of marriage as little more than a financial contract between men. Eliot appropriates aspects of the epic form without providing an actual epic to aggrandize (and then deflate) traditional ideas of love and marriage.

Unlike Boccaccio's story, Eliot's version includes epic language, including epithets such as "Young Lisa" (*Poems* 65), "gentle Lisa" (67), "Sweet Lisa" (68), and "fair Lisa" (83), formulaic Homeric phrases such as "wingèd passion" and "wingèd speech" (68), and frequent use of the word "hero" (and variant forms "heroes," "heroic") to describe Lisa's lofty aspirations for love (66-67). In presenting the epic hero, Eliot takes advantage of the

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<sup>73</sup> More often discussed by critics, *The Spanish Gypsy* is recognized as an epic work. Both poems are set in medieval times: "How Lisa Loved the King" in thirteenth-century Italy and *The Spanish Gypsy* in fifteenth-century Spain. "Lisa" lacks the length of an epic poem but has obvious epic qualities.

courtly love role reversal scenario presented by Boccaccio to call into question the identity of the hero. Lisa describes the king as a hero when she expresses her hope to love “some hero noble, beautiful, great, / Who would live stories worthy to narrate” (67), but it is Lisa who is described in heroic language and whose story is narrated.<sup>74</sup> Eliot also alters Boccaccio’s prose tale by masterfully writing heroic couplets with alexandrines to conclude (and sometimes interrupt) verse paragraphs.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, she invokes a muse, reaches to a faraway setting, and adds epic similes throughout.<sup>76</sup> The poem begins with an invocation to a muse (Dante) and an extended simile that compares medieval Europe to a peaceful and thriving garden:

Six hundred years ago, in Dante's time,  
 Before his cheek was furrowed by deep rhyme;  
 When Europe, fed afresh from Eastern story,  
 Was like a garden tangled with the glory

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<sup>74</sup> Lisa and the king both serve important roles in the poem; both serve to represent the traditional values and practices of marriage. Lisa is the embodiment of female obedience, and the king is the embodiment of male mastery.

<sup>75</sup> Eliot inserts three interrupting alexandrines in which she highlights Lisa’s desire to be thought of by the king (70-71), the king’s reflection on Lisa’s passionate expression of love (78), and the king’s claim of one kiss by which to remember her (81). These insertions punctuate the romantic aspirations and effects of Lisa’s love. The irregular meter highlights a passion that is at once irregular, improper, and efficacious.

<sup>76</sup> Epic similes are abundant. For example, Lisa compares herself to a pigeon or spot on the wall:  
 She watched all day that she might see him pass  
 With knights and ladies; but she said, "Alas!  
 Though he should see me, it were all as one  
 He saw a pigeon sitting on the stone  
 Of wall or balcony: some colored spot  
 His eye just sees, his mind regardeth not. (68)

Also, Lisa compares Minuccio to a trusted priest in another extended simile:

Finished the song, she prayed to be alone  
 With kind Minuccio; for her faith had grown  
 To trust him as if missioned like a priest  
 With some high grace, that, when his singing ceased,  
 Still made him wiser, more magnanimous,  
 Than common men who had no genius. (72)

Of flowers hand-planted and of flowers air-sown,  
 Climbing and trailing, budding and full-blown,  
 Where purple bells are tossed amid pink stars,  
 And springing blades, green troops in innocent wars,  
 Crowd every shady spot of teeming earth,  
 Making invisible motion visible birth— (64)

With this beginning, the narrator invokes Dante for inspiration and then offers thanks to another muse (Boccaccio) at the end:

Reader, this story pleased me long ago  
 In the bright pages of Boccaccio,  
 And where the author of a good we know,  
 Let us not fail to pay the grateful thanks we owe. (83)

These bookend invocations serve to place Eliot in a tradition of great writers. Eliot the author intrudes at the end of the narrative to thank Boccaccio for his story that inspired hers. By placing herself in a community of great and timeless authors, and by suggesting that such authors “of a good” merit gratitude, she implicitly asks her reader to thank her for her poem. This final joke serves as a reminder of the mocking purpose of the poem.

The epic qualities of the introduction prepare the reader for a narrative about a great hero (Lisa) performing great deeds (loving greatly and marrying obediently) for the sake of ennobling the nation of Italy. Eliot also adds an epic element to the courtly love plot by



magnifying the theme of love.<sup>77</sup> Eliot elevates romantic love (a common theme for the poetess) to give the female hero the appearance of agency, thus setting up the reader to feel disappointed when she ends up in a loveless arranged marriage. The courtly love role reversal (a woman pining for a man) allows Lisa the appearance of control as the pursuer of love, and Eliot's heroine, unlike Boccaccio's, seeks the lofty goal of immortalizing herself with her great love.<sup>78</sup> In Eliot's version, she not only seeks the king's attention but also aims to make a permanent impression with her great love. In Boccaccio's story, "a thought came into [Lisa's] head, to make her love known to the king before her death" (*The Decameron* 500). Boccaccio offers no clue as to her intent for expressing her love to the king, but in Eliot's story,

night and day, her unstilled thought  
 Wandering all o'er its little world, had sought  
 How she could reach, by some soft pleading touch,  
 King Pedro's soul, that she who loved so much  
 Dying, might have a place within his mind—  
 A little grave which he would sometimes find  
 And plant some flower on it—some thought, some  
 memory kind. (*Poems* 71)

Eliot's Lisa seeks immortality through love. She asks singer Minuccio to help express her

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<sup>77</sup> Eliot's title, "How Lisa Loved the King," indicates at the outset that love will play a major role in the story.

<sup>78</sup> Another poetess, Barrett Browning, employs such gender role reversal in her sonnet sequence, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. In these sonnets, a woman declares her love for a man. Edith Simcox reports in her diary that Eliot discussed *Sonnets* with her in 1878, but there is no direct evidence that Eliot had this series in mind when writing "How Lisa Loved the King" (*Letters* 9:236).

love to the king:

She told him how that secret glorious harm  
 Of loftiest loving had befallen her;  
 That death, her only hope, most bitter were,  
 If when she died her love must perish too  
 As songs unsung and thoughts unspoken do,  
 Which else might live within another breast.  
 She said, "Minuccio, the grave were rest,  
 If I were sure, that lying cold and lone,  
 My love, my best of life, had safely flown  
 And nestled in the bosom of the king;  
 See, 'tis a small weak bird, with unfledged wing.  
 But you will carry it for me secretly,  
 And bear it to the king, then come to me  
 And tell me it is safe, and I shall go  
 Content, knowing that he I love my love doth know." (72)

Lisa's "loftiest" love, her "best of life," can afford peace in death if she can know that the knowledge of it resides in the king's breast. By seeking immortal life, Lisa appears to take on an active role. In Boccaccio's tale, love happens to Lisa and she languishes and prepares to die. In Eliot's poem, Lisa aims for greatness through her possession of a grand love.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Tuchman explains the significance of courtly love in the medieval concept of chivalry: If tournaments were an acting-out of chivalry, courtly love was its dreamland. Courtly love was understood by its contemporaries to be love for its own sake, romantic love, true love, physical love, unassociated with property or family, and consequently focused on another man's wife, since only

However, Lisa's great love requires male intervention for expression. Lisa needs Minuccio (male singer) and Mico (male poet) to express her love to the king. Men mediate Lisa's voice. As a woman, she can love (as a woman should), but she requires men to voice her love. Thus, Eliot sends the message that society elevates women for their natural and great ability to love and nurture while subjecting such love to male management.

Eliot emphasizes Lisa's smallness to increase the epic value of her love. By contrasting Lisa's great and lofty love with her person, which the poem depicts as "small," "weak," "tiny," "miniature," "lowly," "frail," etc. (68-69, 72, 74-5, 77, 81), Eliot creates in Lisa a love that takes on a life of its own and surpasses human capacity and understanding:

How Lisa's lowly love had highest reach  
 Of wingèd passion, whereto wingèd speech  
 Would be scorched remnants left by mounting flame.  
 Though, had she such lame message, were it blame  
 To tell what greatness dwelt in her, what rank  
 She held in loving? (68)

Minuccio sings to the king a song that voices Lisa's powerfully elevating love:

I am a lowly maid,  
 No more than any little knot of thyme  
 That he with careless foot may often tread;  
 Yet lowest fragrance oft will mount sublime

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such an illicit liaison could have no other aim but love alone. . . . As formulated by chivalry, romance was pictured as extra-marital because love was considered irrelevant to marriage, was indeed discouraged in order not to get in the way of dynastic arrangements. (66)

Lisa loves a married man, but this impropriety is never mentioned. Her class rank alone is what makes consummation inconceivable.

And cleave to things most high and hallowèd,  
 As doth the fragrance of my life's springtime,  
 My lowly love, that soaring seeks to climb  
 Within his thought, and make a gentle bliss,  
 More blissful than if mine, in being his:  
 So shall I live in him and rest in Death. (74-75)

Lisa's love actively soars and climbs toward the lofty goal of immortal life. By elevating Lisa's love to epic proportions, Eliot recreates the ordinary occurrence of falling in love into an extraordinary activity. Though born "of no noble line" (65), Lisa loves greatly like an epic hero and strives for immortality by loving superhumanly. Yet ironically, her powerful ability to love does not result in her receiving love. Her love for one man results in marriage to another.

In addition to magnifying love to epic proportions, Eliot also elevates marriage. Marriage in Boccaccio's version does not take on great national importance. It is significant primarily for Lisa's family, who benefits from the king's marriage arrangement and dowry, and secondarily for the king, who secures his subjects' affection through his noble actions (marrying Lisa off and styling himself as her knight). However, these actions are among others that earn the king's favored status: "Such actions as these gain the hearts of the people, serve as an example for others to imitate, and secure in the end an everlasting fame" (*The Decameron* 504). Marriage in *The Decameron* provides a happy ending to a courtly love tale. Eliot imbues greater meaning to marriage in her version by changing the story so that the king represents the entire nation in his interaction with Lisa and makes it his great work (and one of national importance) to settle her marriage. Whereas Boccaccio's king addresses Lisa

as a subject and speaks for himself alone, using the first person singular “I,” “me,” and “my” when addressing his subject, Lisa, Eliot’s king addresses Lisa as a collective entity, using the first person plural “we,” “us,” and “our.” At times Eliot’s king uses first person plural as an expression of the royal “we” to speak not as his own proper person but on behalf of the nation, as a divine representative of his people. For example, he uses the royal “we” when he addresses Lisa with his queen and courtiers in company: “Excellent maiden, that rich gift of love / Your heart hath made *us* hath a worth above / All royal treasures” (80-81, emphasis added). At other times, however, he uses first person plural to describe himself plus multiple other people. For instance, he says: “Twere dole to *all of us*, / The world should lose a maid so beauteous” (77-78, emphasis added). The “all of” indicates multiple people.

In the many instances in which Eliot’s king refers to himself in the first person plural in speaking to Lisa, whether or not he uses the royal “we,” he speaks as representative of the people. Unlike Boccaccio’s king who asks Lisa to get well for his sake: “Fair maid, how comes it that you are ill? You are young, and should be a delight to others; then why will you suffer this illness to prey upon you? For *my* sake be comforted and get well” (502, emphasis added), Eliot’s king charges Lisa to get well for the sake of the entire nation. He uses first person plural to show that he speaks for himself, the queen, and the entire nation:

Lady, what is this?

You, whose sweet youth should others’ solace be,

Pierce *all our* hearts, languishing piteously.

*We* pray you, for the love of *us*, be cheered,

Nor be too reckless of that life, endeared

To *us* who know your passing worthiness,

And count your blooming life as part of *our* life's bliss. (78, emphasis added)

In Eliot's version, the king says that her languishing pierces "all our" hearts (indicating not the royal "we" but many people). He asks Lisa to get well and be cheerful for the betterment of society. The king suggests that her youthfulness, beauty, and cheerful disposition contribute to the well-being of all the nation's people. He wants her to strive to be a delight to society rather than waste away unnaturally. He tells her that the "rich gift of love / Your heart hath made *us*, hath a worth above / All royal treasures" (80-81, emphasis added). The king perceives the greatness of Lisa's love and interprets her love as a gift not only for him but for all the community.

The king uses the royal "we" when he vows to be Lisa's cavalier and carry a token from her when he fights in battle or at festival tournament:

*We* while *we* live your cavalier will be;  
 Nor will *we* ever arm ourselves for fight,  
 Whether for struggle dire, or brief delight  
 Of warlike feigning, but *we* first will take  
 The colors you ordain, and for your sake  
 Charge the more bravely where your emblem is:  
 Nor will *we* claim from you an added bliss  
 To *our* sweet thoughts of you save one sole kiss.  
 But there still rests the outward honor meet  
 To mark your worthiness; and *we* entreat  
 That you will turn your ear to proffered vows  
 Of one who loves you, and would be your spouse. (81, emphasis added)

The king's offer to be Lisa's knight carries significance for the entire nation. He will garner courage to fight bravely from a visible reminder of her obedient love. Both the king and Lisa seek immortality: Lisa through loving the king, and the king through deeds in battle and increased territory. They both succeed. The loyal subjects who benefit from the king's battle successes will always tell the story of how Lisa loved the king. The king uses "we" to urge Lisa to marry for the sake of the nation:

*We must not wrong yourself and Sicily*

*By letting all your blooming years pass by*

*Unmated: you will give the world its due*

*From beauteous maiden and become a matron true. (81, emphasis added)*

Her remaining single while getting old would be a blight to all Sicily. Lisa's love contributes to the greatness of the nation.

But her love does not result in a happy love relationship. Out of love for the king, she accepts as her duty the king's command to marry, saying:

*But, as you better know than I, the heart*

*In choosing chooseth not its own desert,*

*But that great merit which attracteth it;*

*'Tis law, I struggled, but I must submit,*

*And having seen a worth all worth above,*

*I loved you, love you, and shall always love.*

*But that doth mean, my will is ever yours,*

*Not only when your will my good insures*

*But if it wrought me what the world calls harm. (82)*

Lisa submits her will to the king and marries Perdicone for the sake of the nation. Eliot adds that Lisa loved “well / The lot that from obedience befell” (82). The king takes on a priestly role, uniting the two and proclaiming their union sacred and beneficial to all the community: “Now *we* claim *our* share / From your sweet love, a share which is not small: / For in the sacrament one crumb is all” (82, emphasis added). The community participates in the divine sacrament of Lisa’s marriage as if they partake in the sacrament of Christ’s body. Lisa’s marriage takes on sacred meaning for all of Sicily. The king vows to carry the married Lisa’s emblem when he goes into battle and win territory in the name of feminine obedience. Eliot’s king speaks in first person plural in his interaction with Lisa to represent the entire nation and elevate the national and sacred value of the institution of marriage. By exalting Lisa’s arranged marriage to an event of national importance, Eliot points out the fact that society at once elevates women as the reproductive center of society while offering legal non-existence by virtue of their sex. Society charges women with the primary task of carrying on tradition by getting married and raising children who will continue to further male-dominant notions of marriage and gender status. By valuing women who perpetuate traditional gender ideals and marginalizing women who do not, men were able to continue the cycle that gave them societal power.

Eliot further criticizes the male-controlled institution of marriage by presenting Lisa’s marriage as a business exchange between men.<sup>80</sup> In *The Decameron*, the king chooses Perdicone as Lisa’s husband and, along with the queen, gives them “many jewels and other valuable presents” as well as two estates as a dowry (503). In Eliot’s version, Bernardo,

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<sup>80</sup> In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Eve Sedgwick explains that the social contract of marriage represented a homosocial bond between men that relied on women as objects of exchange between fathers and husbands.



Lisa's father, seeks to elevate his social status by marrying Lisa to Perdicone, a man of higher birth (and lesser fortune) than himself. The narrator says of Bernardo:

He loved his riches well,  
 But loved them chiefly for his Lisa's sake,  
 Whom with a father's care he sought to make  
 The bride of some true honorable man,—  
 Of Perdicone (so the rumor ran),  
 Whose birth was higher than his fortunes were,  
 For still your trader likes a mixture fair  
 Of blood that hurries to some higher strain  
 Than reckoning money's loss and money's gain.  
 And of such mixture good may surely come:  
 Lord's scions so may learn to cast a sum,  
 A trader's grandson bear a well-set head,  
 And have less conscious manners, better bred;  
 Nor, when he tries to be polite, be rude instead. (65)

By adding this passage, Eliot addresses the problem of the commodification of women and the treatment of marriage as an exchange of property. Lisa's marriage results in her family's increased rank in society and Perdicone's increased financial status, but it is not based on love—the quality that the narrator has gone to great pains to explain most characterizes Lisa. Lisa seems to be greatly influential in matters of love but has no influence over her own love life. Once her father's property, Lisa becomes Perdicone's property after marriage. The marriage is supposedly a great honor for Lisa, but she gains nothing. Marriage merely

transfers her from one owner to another. Likewise, in the nineteenth-century, fathers transferred women as property to husbands, and though some women enjoyed loving relationships as a result of marriage, many did not.<sup>81</sup> The limited options for living independently forced many women into marriages that were little more than financial contracts in which the husband, as owner of the wife, had the power to treat her as lovingly or as cruelly as he chose. By elevating the marriage of a common girl to an event of epic significance, while adding an element of commodification, Eliot condemns the patriarchal practice of using women as vehicles for elevating status and restoring dwindling fortunes, and equates Victorian marriage with medieval arranged marriage.

Finally, Eliot expands upon the king's war exploits while elevating the theme of marriage to further her mock-epic agenda. While Lisa performs romantic tasks worthy of a female hero, King Pedro performs manly heroic feats. Boccaccio relates that his tale takes place "at the time when the French were driven out of Sicily" and concerns King Pietro, who became "lord of the whole island" of Palermo (*The Decameron* 499).<sup>82</sup> Eliot elaborates the background information to amplify the elements of war and revenge:

Six hundred years ago, Palermo town  
 Kept holiday. A deed of great renown,  
 A high revenge, had freed it from the yoke  
 Of hated Frenchmen, and from Calpe's rock  
 To where the Bosphorus caught the earlier sun,

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<sup>81</sup> Eliot signed the Married Women's Property Bill petition, which was presented to Parliament in 1856.

<sup>82</sup> In "Lisa," Eliot invoked a faraway time and place by choosing to recreate a story set in medieval Palermo. The poetess often reached to distant places and times to escape present-day cultural restrictions. This technique will be discussed at greater length in chapter four.

‘Twas told that Pedro, King of Aragon,  
 Was welcomed master of all Sicily,  
 A royal knight, supreme as kings should be  
 In strength and gentleness that make high chivalry. (*Poems* 64)

Eliot’s additions create a picture of a great king who wins territory as a result of his heroic deeds in war. The themes of marriage and war intersect at the end of the story. Boccaccio’s story ends with the marriage of Lisa and Perdicone, the king’s promise always to be Lisa’s knight, and the king’s fame for chivalry:

So the marriage was solemnized, to the great joy of her husband, father, and mother; and many report that the king was very constant to his promise, for that, as long as he lived, he always styled himself her knight, and never carried any other token of favour upon his arms but what she sent him.—Such actions as these gain the hearts of the people, serve as an example for others to imitate, and secure in the end an everlasting fame. But there are few now-a-days that trouble their heads about that, the greater part of our princes being rather cruel tyrants. (*The Decameron* 504)

Boccaccio emphasizes the king’s winning the favor of his people for his kind action and gentle chivalry, which contrasts with the usual tyrannical nature of kings. Eliot’s conclusion at first resembles Boccaccio’s in theme. She relates how the king pledges to “call himself fair Lisa’s faithful knight; / And never wore in field or tournament / A scarf or emblem save by Lisa sent” (*Poems* 83).<sup>83</sup> But then she adds a final note of war and revenge:

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<sup>83</sup> Lisa appears to have the power to influence a king, but in fact, she has no power at all. Lisa performs the great deed of attracting the king’s attention, but only with the help of two men, Minuccio and Mico. She appears to control history: the king will wear her emblem for the rest of his noble career to honor her great love, and subjects will remember her story when they see the king carry her emblem. Yet she has no control over her

Such deeds made subjects loyal in that land:  
 They joyed that one so worthy to command,  
 So chivalrous and gentle, had become  
 The king of Sicily, and filled the room  
 Of Frenchmen, who abused the Church's trust,  
 Till, in a righteous vengeance on their lust,  
 Messina rose, with God, and with the dagger's thrust. (83)

Eliot's bookend invocations (to Dante and Boccaccio) frame the story of King Pedro's vengeance against the hated, heretical Frenchmen. She relays the accounts of the king's slaughterous revenge just after the first invocation and before the final one. These bloody reminders of the king's warlike exploits which led to territorial conquest again frame the story of Lisa's lofty love and the king's knightly behavior toward her. By adding the king's territorial and political conquests while elevating the love story to epic proportions, Eliot highlights her ironic intent. By making the marriage of a common subject a matter of supreme importance to the great King of Aragon and "master of all Sicily" (64) and by making Lisa "of no noble line" (65) an epic-like heroine and great courtly love, Eliot actually deflates the meaning of marriage and calls for a reevaluation of archaic notions that at once elevate and debase women.

Eliot's comment on marriage likely stemmed from her own experience. Eliot lived with Lewes from 1854 until his death in 1878, and they referred to one another as husband and wife. For her, marriage represented a sacred union based on love between equals. Eliot

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own marriage prospects. The concluding arranged marriage is deflating. Though Lisa has no voice and no control, Eliot does. She exercises that control by immortalizing Lisa and her own message in the poem.

signed her name as Mrs. Lewes and instructed others to refer to her as Mrs. Lewes. Lewes, however, was still legally married to Agnes Jervis and could not extricate himself from their marriage due to his having legitimized the four children she had by Thornton Hunt.<sup>84</sup> Eliot suffered consequences for her choice to unite with Lewes. Her brother disowned her, and society branded her a home-wrecker and a fallen woman. A sensitive person by nature, she was deeply hurt by the rumors and societal alienation.<sup>85</sup> Her relationship with Lewes was a true partnership, not a financial contract, and as such, more of a marriage than many that held legal status in her view. She and Lewes both earned money and engaged one another as equals. Telling Lisa's story allowed her to demonstrate the negative aspects of traditional marriage without directly announcing her own non-traditional views.

## CONCLUSION

Had Eliot expressed non-traditional views on marriage and gender roles in her widely-read novels, she might have brought attention to herself and her own lifestyle. Fear of

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<sup>84</sup> Haight explains that by the time of the birth of Agnes' second child (Rose) by Thornton in 1851, Lewes had stopped regarding her as his wife:

He still kept on friendly terms with her, however, coming to see her from time to time, writing to her when he was away, and contributing to support her and her illegitimate brood as long as he lived. Today a divorce would have set him free; but then divorce was out of the question. Even if he had had the hundreds of pounds it required for the cumbersome legal process, Lewes, having once condoned her adultery, was forever precluded from appealing for divorce. (132)

<sup>85</sup> In a letter to her friend Charles Bray, she wrote emotionally:

Of course many silly myths are already afloat about me, in addition to the truth, which of itself would be thought matter for scandal. I am quite unconcerned about them except as they may cause pain to my real friends. If you hear of anything that I have said, done, or written in relation to Mr. Lewes beyond the simple fact that I am attached to him and that I am living with him, do me the justice to believe that it is false. You and Mr. Chapman are the only persons to whom I have ever spoken of his private position and of my relation to him. . . . Pray pardon this long letter on a painful subject. I felt it a duty to write it. . . . I am quite prepared to accept the consequences of a step which I have deliberately taken and to accept them without irritation or bitterness. The most painful consequence will, I know, be loss of friends. If I do not write, therefore, understand that it is because I desire not to obtrude myself. . . . I am full of affection towards you all, and whatever you may think of me, shall always be . . . Your true and grateful friend Marian Evans. (*Letters* 2:179)

drawing negative attention may be why she more subtly expressed these views in poetry.<sup>86</sup> In her poetry, she took greater risks and made bolder statements on gender matters. She did so by appearing to promote middle-class values while inserting subversive views. In “How Lisa Loved the King” and in “Brother and Sister,” Eliot appeared to promote feminine obedience and traditional gender roles when she actually made subtle comments to the contrary. Her messages relating to gender matters in her poetry extended in purpose beyond fairness. She wanted a better society for women and for men, one that would allow women greater choices beyond marriage and domestic life and benefit all of society by bringing women’s sensibility into the public sphere. Freeing women from rigid rules of decorum and allowing men and women greater access to communication with one another would promote greater understanding between the sexes. Likewise, she believed, equal education would create a more balanced society with the best minds of both sexes participating in civic life. By addressing issues of gender in her poetry, Eliot was able to encourage sympathetic relationships, greater respect for all, and thus a better society.

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<sup>86</sup> Meg Tasker explains that sexual matters were more easily addressed in poetry than in novels, both for men and women authors: “Not only may sexual desire or activity be described indirectly, through metaphor and allusion (this, after all, is possible in prose), but they could be more freely employed *as* metaphor in poetry” (36).

## CHAPTER THREE

### George Eliot and Religion: Poetess and Prophet of Sympathy

“If Art does not enlarge men’s sympathies, it does nothing morally”  
-George Eliot

Scholars discuss George Eliot’s religious views and her concept of sympathy but rarely in relation to her poetry writing. However, Eliot wrote religious poems throughout her career. As a young evangelical Christian, she relied on religious terminology and Christian teachings to convey orthodox religious views, and as an apostate, she relied on the same religious language and doctrine to convey unorthodox religious views. After she left the Christian faith in 1842, she began to consider sympathy, rather than organized religion, as a way of living a moral life. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, she developed her religious views and eventually settled into a belief in sympathy as a substitute for religion. She used the poetess tradition, one that relied on femininity and spiritual authority, to further her belief in the sacred value of sympathetic relationships. Perhaps critics overlook Eliot’s appeal to sympathy in her poetry because it seems contradictory for an unorthodox believer to rely on religious rhetoric in her writing. In this chapter, I address this seeming contradiction by discussing the cultural environment in which Eliot lived, her religious upbringing and conversion from Christianity to a religion of sympathy, and her assimilation of new religious ideas in her poetry with the help of the poetess tradition. I will analyze “Mid the Rich Store of Nature’s Gifts to Man” and “O May I Join the Choir Invisible” to reveal Eliot’s belief in the sacred value of sympathetic human interaction.

## RELIGION, POETRY, AND A PLACE FOR WOMEN WRITERS

Religion influenced politics and dominated the cultural environment in nineteenth-century Great Britain. At the beginning of the century, the Church of England seemed to hold a stable position as the national religious authority and arbiter of religious thought. However, political and social forces were at work that would lead to radical change in the religious life of the country. The Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1828) removed disabilities imposed on non-Anglican Protestants (Dissenters), and the Catholic Emancipation Act (1829) removed disabilities imposed on Catholics.<sup>87</sup> These acts reshaped the Anglican constitution into a Christian, non-denominational one, resulting in greater acceptance of non-Anglicans, bringing about a greater sense of individual choice in regard to religious life, and creating a sense of religious disorder in the country.

Imperial expansion also contributed to the unsettled religious climate of England. Victorian Christians became increasingly aware of other religions, and this worldwide context forced some to question whether they had sole possession of the truth. Some began to question the morality of core Christian doctrines such as eternal damnation and substitutionary atonement (Melnik *Victorian Religion* 134). The theory of evolution and geological and archaeological discoveries dating the earth into the millions, rather than thousands, of years unsettled orthodox ideas about God, creation, and humanity's place in the world. Nineteenth-century scientific discoveries challenged the idea of biblical inerrancy and

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<sup>87</sup> Dissenters gathered in churches that did not identify with the Church of England. Marks of their belief system included personal confession of faith and acceptance of moral discipline. They were viewed as outsiders, and until the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, they were excluded from public life. Roman Catholics in England comprised a few noble families and Irish laborers and were generally seen as a politically hostile alien force and a possible threat to the nation's security. Roman Catholics were also excluded from public life (Worrall 11-14).



Christian understandings of the world. New ways of interpreting the Bible as a historical or mythological document rather than the Word of God further undermined Christianity's central source of authority. These scientific and societal changes influenced the nature of Christian belief in Britain.

Nineteenth-century writers recorded (and at times contributed to) the national religious turbulence.<sup>88</sup> Authors who engaged with Christianity represented a diversity of perspectives and employed a variety of literary media.<sup>89</sup> Poetry in particular provided a useful space for religious expression. Linda Hughes explains that the connection between Victorian poetry and religious faith “derives from biblical tradition (especially David’s authorship of the Psalms), Dantesque and Miltonic epic, English hymnody, and a line of British poets extending from Langland through George Herbert, William Cowper, and the mature Wordsworth among others” (*Cambridge Introduction* 141). The sacred role of poetry, she notes, was influenced by the Oxford (or Tractarian) Movement, which aimed to revive religious faith and traditional practice (141).<sup>90</sup> Leaders of the Tractarian movement, such as John Keble, theologian and professor of poetry at Oxford, and John Henry Newman, priest and Oxford academic, viewed poetry as a form of worship. Keble expressed the commonplace idea that British religious thought and poetry were inextricably entwined when he explained that poetry was the “handmaid of piety”:

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<sup>88</sup> Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859) and *Essays and Reviews* (1860), a collection of articles summarizing a challenge to biblical history by the higher critics and to biblical prehistory by geologists and biologists, shook the religious community.

<sup>89</sup> My discussion on religion will focus on Christianity since it was the dominant religious force in nineteenth-century Britain.

<sup>90</sup> Tractarians were members of the Oxford Movement, which was dominated by clerics and educated men (such as Keble) who aimed to restore High Church practice to the Church of England and recover the idea of the Church as a divine institution (Worrall 15-17).

[W]hat more conceivable than that all poetry may have been providentially bestowed on man as the first elements, the prelude, so to speak, of genuine piety? Since, for one thing, ancient records as a rule bear out the conclusion that there has seldom been a revival of religion unless a high and noble order of poets has first led the way: and, for another, both in effect and in character, real Religion is in striking accord with true poetry. (473)

The Tractarians believed that poetry resulted from divine inspiration and could communicate virtue and piety through its meter and rhythm. They thought religious poetry could affect the believer emotionally and regarded it as synonymous with religious truth itself (Knight and Mason 100). Those who engaged with poetry, that is, entered into a religious and lyrical experience that allowed for “the emotive effect poetry and religion produced on readers; the consolatory quality of such an effect; and the regulation of the consequent feeling in believers (too much feeling, it was feared, could unbalance the believer altogether)” (Tennyson 3). Considered a sacred manner of expression, poetry was linked with prayer and devotion. Writers seeking solace in uncertain times found that poetry in particular lent itself to spiritual expression. The poetic form freed the believer to feel faith in an age when belief was under threat from enlightenment reason. The form also allowed a space for the non-believing writer and reader to experience confusion and uncertainty.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> David Shaw makes the following points to describe how Victorian religion influenced the poetry of the period: first, during the 1830s, recovery of biblical types in the conservative hermeneutics of John Keble and the Tractarians influenced the work of poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Second, in the 1850s, the liberal theology of the biblical higher critics, notably David Strauss (and in the 1860s, the “broad church” hermeneutics of Benjamin Jowett), influenced Robert Browning. Also mid-century, the agnostic theology of Thomas Carlyle and the neo-Kantians gave rise to the doubt and cosmic questioning of Tennyson, Arthur Clough, and Matthew Arnold. Throughout the nineteenth-century, a theology of human evolution and self-making influenced Browning and Tennyson. Finally, George Eliot created a religion of morality, Matthew Arnold a religion of culture, and Walter Pater a religion of art (457).

Religion was a socially acceptable area of interest and experience for women, and so they responded by pouring their energies into religious life and literature.<sup>92</sup> Encouragement of women's religious work and literature did not extend to theological writing, which society considered a masculine discourse. Women were forbidden from the university and the pulpit and from writing theological genres such as the sermon and treatise.<sup>93</sup> Typically excluded by nineteenth-century institutions, women used poetry as a site to do theology.<sup>94</sup> Poetry offered a sanctioned public forum in which women could give voice to theological ideas. Adela Pinch explains that the end of the eighteenth-century saw a period of expansion in poetry reading and writing, and poetry came to be associated with feminine feeling. Treatises for women discouraged the pernicious influence of novel reading but approved of the reading and memorizing of poetry (*Strange Fits* 56). Women writers could exploit the link between poetry and femininity. Pinch states:

Woman poets were conscious of the extent to which they could both take advantage of and be limited by their culture's association of women with sensibility. In a period

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<sup>92</sup> Rebecca Styler explains the role of Evangelicalism in giving spiritual validation to the role of middle-class domesticity:

Women and home became identified as redemptive forces in a society which needed reform, and the female character was interpreted in essentialist terms as innately more akin to Christian values than was the male. . . . This perceived harmony between Christianity and women meant that they were given the redemptive task of making home a place to compensate for the harshness and moral compromise of the masculine public realm. (9)

Society considered women spiritual representatives of the nation. As such, they offered men a domestic spiritual haven that contrasted the harsh realities of the public sphere. Women writers took advantage of this perceived association of spirituality and domesticity.

<sup>93</sup> Susan Staves points out that Church of England clergymen helped women writers cultivate their talent and publish. Scholarly bishops and archbishops opened their libraries to learned women with the understanding that they would provide a proper religious education to the nation's children. This led to women establishing schools to educate poor children and women addressing other women on spiritual matters. By supporting women's spiritual education, the clergy was able to offer to the world models of Anglican feminine belief and piety, thereby enhancing the reputation of the Church of England (85-88).

<sup>94</sup> Women could also write translations, biography, letters, novels, devotional manuals, and contributions to the periodical press because these were considered non-controversial religious writings.

that placed poetic value on “natural genius,” on the inspired and authentic rather than on the learned and the cultivated, women’s natural sensibility gave them an equal, if not greater, qualification for writing poetry. (57)

By the nineteenth-century, the idea of poet as prophet was commonplace, and poetry, with its inherent relationship to religion, offered the woman poet the elevated status of poet/prophet in the public realm.<sup>95</sup> In a society that generally prohibited women’s participation in theological discourse, women poets found creative ways to do theology.<sup>96</sup> In the face of religious skepticism, women poets claimed authority to write religious poetry and soothe the nation in a time of distress, and they justified publishing sacred poetry since they did it in God’s name.

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<sup>95</sup> Scheinberg views the poet/prophet as a man who integrated characteristics associated with men and women in a single prophetic identity. She states: “Because Victorian culture relied so heavily on a system of separate gendered spheres which demarcated all kinds of human experience, this construction of the poet as one who can move between different realms of experience and identity served as a distinct challenge to those explicitly gendered identities—at least in terms of male poets who were ‘allowed’ to negotiate the gendered crossings that Romantic poetic theory constructed” (*Women’s Poetry* 39). Male poets, Scheinberg argues, appropriated the female realm of the heart for their own use. The image of the heart symbolized femaleness and femininity, signified sensibility and emotion, and was connected to the body (which stood in opposition to the intellect). Male poets had to reclaim feminine attributes while women only had to excel as poets of the heart. Women could not claim male characteristics the way that men claimed female attributes. The male poet was a universal entity while the woman was more limited. The idea of separate spheres thus relegated women to a certain kind of poetry that did not lead them to transgress gender boundaries as male poets might. So women poets came to be understood as possessing only one side of the poet/prophet sensibility. Women poets therefore had to “transcend” the heart, the domestic realm, and sensibility. According to Scheinberg, women had to challenge patriarchal relegation and claim realms of intellect and philosophy in order to claim poetic authority (38-41). Scheinberg’s analysis is revealing; however, I would suggest that women poets did not necessarily have to transcend domestic realms. Some conveyed radical opinions by associating themselves with a feminine tradition that linked women and spirituality.

<sup>96</sup> Laporte explains why women poets were inclined toward apocryphal texts: “The peculiar liminal status of such texts afforded women poets a certain power, for the texts were not sacred in the Protestant churches, yet they were manifestly cousin to much that is, and they showed how sacred-ness in texts is culturally selected” (*Victorian Poets* 217). Eliot’s use of a midrashic text in “The Death of Moses” indicates her regard for apocryphal texts (including her own) as just as authoritative as canonical ones.

## GEORGE ELIOT'S RELIGION AND ROLE AS POET

Eliot's role in England's religious upheaval was significant. She contributed to the increasing sense of religious uncertainty by helping to introduce German ideas of higher criticism to England via her translations of David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846) and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* (1854), works that demystified and humanized Christianity. Conversely, she participated in the poetess tradition, one that was associated with the promotion of feminine, domestic, and spiritual ideals. To understand these seemingly paradoxical roles, one must trace her stance toward religion from her youth. Eliot's religious journey began in the Anglican Church that she attended regularly with her family. Her father, a conservative High Church Anglican, had Eliot baptized in their parish church at Chilvers Coton.<sup>97</sup> At the age of nine, she attended school at Nuneaton, where she was strongly influenced by her evangelical (Low Church Anglican) teacher, Maria Lewis, and from age thirteen to sixteen, she went to a Coventry school which was run by Mary and Rebecca Franklin, daughters of a Baptist (Low Church Dissenting) minister.<sup>98</sup> Such

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<sup>97</sup> "High Church" and "Low Church" refer to two parties within the Church of England. The High Church party believed in the centrality of sacraments and the importance of the role of the Church in the spiritual lives of its members. The High Church party embraced orthodox theology and rejected enthusiasm. High Church congregants believed the order of bishops, priests, and deacons was essential to its life. The Low Church party (which later came to mean opposition to ritual in worship) de-emphasized sacraments and ritual in worship, emphasized moral behavior, and viewed clergy as models and teachers of manners, not as mediators between God and man. Evangelicals within the Church of England were the most influential of the Low Church party. The Evangelical movement (begun with John Wesley in the prior century) recovered sixteenth century Reformation doctrines such as justification by faith alone and emphasized conversion, sinfulness of humanity, future judgment by God, repentance, confession of guilt, awareness of Christ's forgiveness, living a moral life, and relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Evangelicals downplayed ritual, convention, and rationalism and favored an emotional response to the gospel. They strongly believed in personal salvation and holy living and did not concern themselves much with theology or the Church as an institution. However, they accepted the establishment of the Church of England because they believed that obedience to Christ equated to obedience to the state (Worrall 6-11).

<sup>98</sup> Rosemary Ashton, who describes the religious climate in the area in which Eliot lived, explains that religious dissent thrived, but the Evans family remained Anglican: "There were chapels of all denominations:

evangelical influences during these formative years shaped Eliot into a pious and self-righteous young woman.<sup>99</sup> Her letters from this period reveal a serious girl with a zeal for developing her inner spiritual life through study, prayer, suffering, and austere living. She underwent a conversion experience at age fifteen that led her to study the Bible and religious books with fervor. She began to neglect her appearance in order to show concern for her soul, and she practiced charity and abstained from pleasures such as theatergoing. She later confessed, “I used to go about like an owl...to the great disgust of my brother” (Cross 1.157). Her letters reveal her commitment to asceticism and self-denial, but there is no evidence that she adhered to the doctrines of atonement and justification by faith. There is also no evidence that she believed in humanity’s sinfulness. Avrom Fleishman concludes that Christianity for Eliot was not redemptive or salvific. Rather, Christianity provided “an alternative structure to organize a sense of life’s inadequacy, the inadequacy both of the world in which she lived and of her own existence” (16).<sup>100</sup> Lacking commitment to key tenets of Evangelical theology, the young Eliot was open to alternate religious views.

In 1841, her family moved to Foleshill where she met and befriended Charles and Cara Bray, freethinking Unitarians who offered Eliot an intellectually challenging

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Baptist, Wesleyan, Unitarian, Quaker, Congregationalist. Though her own family belonged to the middle-of-the-road Anglican community, Mary Anne herself was strongly evangelical. (“Evans”). Haight says that though strongly influenced by her religious experience at the Franklins’ school, she did not take an interest in the Baptist doctrines but rather still regarded herself as belonging to the Church of England (20). In short, Eliot identified with the evangelical Anglicans (though not strictly) as opposed to the evangelical Dissenters. She sympathized with her Baptist teachers and her Methodist aunt (who was the model for Dinah in *Adam Bede*), but her statements and practices do not show that the dissenters in her life influenced her beliefs.

<sup>99</sup> Christine Krueger argues that Eliot’s evangelical background provided a model in which women expressed spiritual power; this model prepared her for an “extraordinary call, familiar to women preachers” (235). I would add to Krueger’s astute conclusion that Eliot’s emerging belief in the sacredness of art in addition to her evangelical background prepared her for her role as spiritual guide to her large audience of readers.

<sup>100</sup> The formidable knowledge of the Bible and ecclesiastical history she gained during this period of intense religious study would later prove helpful in creating characters for her literary works.

environment. They introduced her to liberal thinkers, including the social philosophers Herbert Spencer and Harriet Martineau, the social experimentalist Robert Owen, the radical publisher John Chapman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson on his visits from America (Ashton "Evans"). During this time, she read historical accounts of the Bible, including Charles Hennell's *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), which explained away the miracles of the New Testament using reason and logic.<sup>101</sup> She was possibly referring to this book (perhaps along with other higher critical examinations of the Bible) when she wrote to Maria Lewis: "My whole soul has been engrossed in the most interesting of all enquiries for the last few days, and to what result my thoughts may lead I know not—possibly to one that will startle you, but my only desire is to know the truth, my only fear to cling to error" (*Letters* 1:121).

With the reading of these books, her pious views quickly gave way to skeptical ones.<sup>102</sup> In a letter to her father in February 1842, she explained forthrightly her rejection of Christianity:

I wish entirely to remove from your mind the false notion that I am inclined visibly to unite myself with any Christian community, or that I have any affinity in opinion with Unitarians more than with other classes of believers in the Divine authority of the

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<sup>101</sup> Eliot was likely introduced to Hennell's work through his sister, Cara Bray (née Hennell). In his work, Hennell disavowed Christianity as divine revelation but believed it was "the purest form yet existing of natural religion" (vii).

<sup>102</sup> The Brays' influence on Eliot's conversion from Christianity was undeniable. However, Eliot's change in religious views would have come in any case. Haight cites books she read earlier in life, such as those by Walter Scott and Bulwer Lytton. At age thirteen after reading Lytton's *Devereux*, in which there is an "amiable atheist," she was "considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence" (*Letters* 1:45). Antithetically, she was shocked by the union of religious sentiment and a low sense of morality of the mostly Methodist miners near Foleshill. Haight concludes: "While the Brays certainly crystallized her rejection of orthodoxy, it was long in suspense and inevitable. The surprising thing is that her Evangelicalism persisted until she was twenty-two" (39).

books comprising the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. I regard these writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction, and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness. (1:128)

No longer able to believe in Christianity, she refused to go to church with her father. Strife ensued, but eventually they called an uneasy truce. They agreed that she would go to church while being allowed to quietly hold her own opinions. Eliot's de-conversion experience was abrupt and confident. She explained to her friend, Mrs. Abijah Pears (Charles Bray's sister), her disbelief:

For my part, I wish to be among the ranks of that glorious crusade that is seeking to set Truth's Holy Sepulchre free from a usurped domination. We shall then see her resurrection! Meanwhile, although I cannot rank among my principles of action a fear of vengeance eternal, gratitude for predestined salvation, or a revelation of future glories as a reward, I fully participate in the belief that the only heaven here or hereafter is to be found in conformity with the will of the Supreme; a continual aiming at the attainment of that perfect idea, the true Logos that dwells in the bosom of the One Father. I hardly know whether I am ranting after the fashion of one of the Primitive Methodist prophetesses, with a cart for her rostrum, I am writing so fast. (1:125-26)

Interestingly, she used religious terminology ("Truth's Holy Sepulchre," "resurrection," "will of the Supreme," "true Logos," and "One Father") to convey the secular hope that she would



be instrumental in revealing the fact that Truth is independent of religious institutions. She saw herself in the same category as “one of the Primitive Methodist prophetesses” and one who would preach “religious” truth to the masses. Eliot would use religious terminology to convey secular meaning throughout her poetry-writing career. From 1842 (her de-conversion) until the end of her career, she employed Christian language to relay secular messages in her poems, including “Mid the Rich Store of Nature’s Gifts to Man” (1842), “A Minor Prophet” (1865),<sup>103</sup> “Ex Oriente Lux” (1866), “In the South” (1867), “O May I Join the Choir Invisible” (1867), “The Spanish Gypsy” (1868), “Agatha” (1869), “The Legend of Jubal” (1869), “Stradivarius” (1873), “A College Breakfast-Party” (1874), “I Grant You Ample Leave” (1874), “Self and Life” (date unknown), “Mordecai’s Hebrew Verses” (1875, from *Daniel Deronda*, Book 5, Chapter 38), and “The Death of Moses” (1875). I will discuss some of these poems in detail later in the chapter.

Eliot’s post-conversion skepticism, knowledge of the Bible, and great intellect made her the ideal candidate for translating Strauss and Feuerbach. Both higher critical analyses set out to demystify scriptures. Strauss in his *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* set out to disprove two groups of believers: those who believed the miracles in the Gospels were

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<sup>103</sup> In “Atheist Prophecy,” Charles Laporte shows how Eliot embraced the poetess role by combining sentimental piety and religious skepticism in “A Minor Prophet.” Laporte explains that the poem is ostensibly about an American zealot but is actually about a skeptical female narrator who doubts the prophecies of her friend and supernatural religious prophecy in general. The “Minor Prophet” refers to the female skeptic, not the male religious zealot. The narrator believes that prophecy is not “the product of supernatural insights, but of sentimental ones: images of the future derive from the prophet’s fullness of heart” (429). Her skeptical view of prophecy reveals Eliot’s belief in higher criticism; higher critics believed Scripture was inspired poetically. Strauss argued that religious myths came as truths from their authors’ sympathies with their subject. This is the idea that Eliot’s narrator adopted to describe religious faith in general. Formation of myth derives from a spiritual and affective sympathy that Eliot would come to associate with the poetess tradition, especially as practiced and personified by Barrett Browning. Laporte states: “Eliot locates prophecy...in earnest sympathy—the sympathetic soul reflects its desires into its future, as well as into its past” (429-30). Eliot believed the poetess could best further the ideas of higher criticism and considered imaginative literature as a form of prophecy (428). Laporte’s astute analysis sheds new light on this long-overlooked poem and clearly shows that Eliot embraced religious aspects of the poetess role.

literally true and supernaturally significant and those who believed the miracles were literally true but explainable by natural causes. Strauss methodically went through the Gospel narratives to distinguish between the historical and unhistorical events related to the life of Jesus and concluded that the New Testament Gospel writers relied on messianic myths and legends to create an account of Jesus's life. They interpreted Jesus's life as fulfilling prophecy and meeting messianic expectation and then perpetuated the myth of Jesus as messiah through their accounts. According to Strauss, these accounts did not intend to deceive; nevertheless, they are historically unreliable. Strauss's method was exhausting for Eliot, and she was reportedly "Strauss-sick—it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion" (1:206). Her wistfulness for the religion of her youth gave way to exasperation at the monotony of the work (1:203). But in the end, she felt satisfied with the time spent with Strauss (1:218). It is difficult to say to what extent his views influenced hers, but his examination of messianic myths may have left a mark. She would later in her own writing rely on the power of myth to influence others. In her poetry, she sometimes elaborated on Christian myths to tell stories with secular messages. In the "Legend of Jubal," for example, she wrote the story of Jubal, father of the lyre (Genesis 4:21), to relate the value of art to humanity. Laporte points out that her rewriting of biblical narrative "demonstrates faith in the evolution of biblical hermeneutics away from inspirationism and toward a tradition of sentiment and humanism" (*Victorian Poets* 214). In other words, Eliot proposed a new way to experience religious truth through feminine poetics. Eliot also mythologized the death of a prophet in "The Death of Moses" as if she were a scripture writer to engender

sympathy for Jewish people.<sup>104</sup> As a poetess, she had the spiritual authority to tell biblical stories in her own way, fill in the details, and insert new meaning.

Feuerbach's influence on Eliot is easier to conjecture. In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach took an anthropological approach to analyzing Scripture, offering "more humane ways to interpret religion" and "affirmative understandings of human possibilities" (Ermarth, *Oxford Reader's Companion* 111, 119). In his work, Feuerbach explained that God is the projection of man's inward nature. In worshiping God who was incarnated as a human being, humanity worships an ideal form of itself: "The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather the human nature purified, free from the limits of the individual man" (14). Feuerbach's influence on Eliot was pronounced. She proclaimed: "With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree" (*Letters* 2:153). This overstatement indicates her enthusiasm for his ideas that elevated humanity, and she would continue to uphold a high vision of humanity as her worldview expanded. This appreciation for humanity derived from German sources was a necessary prerequisite to the practice of sympathy. Her literary writing would soon reveal the view of an author "for whom relations between people have all the sanctity reserved in orthodox religion for the relationship between the individual and God" (Ashton "Evans"), but that view would come only after she dealt with her frustration with hypocritical and antipathetic models of Christianity.

## A RELIGION OF SYMPATHY

Peter Hodgson remarks that Eliot passed through three major religious phases in her

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<sup>104</sup> Van den Broek credits Cynthia Secor with pointing out the fact that the *Midrash Tanchuma* influenced Eliot's account of Moses's death (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 2:65).

life: evangelicalism, a religion of humanity, and a future religion that incorporated the former phases.<sup>105</sup> The “future religion” of George Eliot, he argues, “would be a truthful religion without accusation and consolation, a practical religion oriented to human feelings, needs and deeds, a spiritual religion attuned to the mystery beneath the real, and a religion open to the idea of a sympathetic, suffering, (omni)present God” (13). I agree with Hodgson’s view of Eliot’s religious progression and her settling into a religious mindset that blended her former beliefs with a new spiritual understanding that included sympathy.<sup>106</sup> However, unlike Hodgson, who sees sympathy as one facet of this “future religion,” I view sympathy as the core tenet of her mature religion. Hodgson discusses Eliot’s concept of a sympathetic and suffering God, who “may be a fiction, but a true and necessary fiction” (22-25). Eliot’s concept of sympathy, however, extends beyond her belief in a sympathetic God to a consideration of sympathetic humanity.<sup>107</sup> In order to understand Eliot’s concept of

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<sup>105</sup> Bernard Paris discusses Eliot’s “religion of humanity,” citing her reading of Comte, Mill, Spencer, Lewes, and Feuerbach. Paris describes Eliot’s “future religion” as a religion of man, not of God, in which sentiment moves man to acts of kindness, unselfishness, and reverence. Paris correctly identifies the place of sentiment, suffering, and humanity in Eliot’s religion, but he overemphasizes the influence of positivism on her thinking (11-19). Eliot wrote neither the positivist novel that Frederic Harrison (a positivist friend) outlined nor positivist prayers that he requested (*Letters* 4:284-89, 300-02, 9:194-95, 6:387-88). She occasionally met with positivists who gathered in London but did not join their group. Vogeler concludes (and I agree) that positivists embraced her poetry as an expression of their beliefs, but she did not subscribe to their religion (77).

<sup>106</sup> Rachel Ablow provides a useful summary of eighteenth-century notions of sympathy by which we can situate Eliot’s understanding of sympathy. Ablow identifies two aspects of sympathy: as pity or compassion and as a source of identity. Shaftesbury, David Hume, Adam Smith and other eighteenth-century philosophers identified sympathy as the common experience of entering into another’s feelings to create a bond and unify communities. Sympathy was a source of civic stability (2). Ablow asserts that by the nineteenth-century, the meaning of sympathy became more closely associated with the private sphere rather than community. She suggests that sympathy was redefined and became less about feeling than about relating to others and defining self (2-3). Eliot’s notion of sympathy is tied to feeling and identification. She emphasizes understanding others and entering into their feelings to create a better and moral community.

<sup>107</sup> In the introduction to Bernard Paris’s *George Eliot’s Religion of Humanity*, George Creeger explains Eliot’s concept of morality in terms of egoism versus sympathy. He says that for Eliot, evil is the inclination for self over others. According to Creeger, Eliot was convinced that man’s greatest immorality lay in modes of narcissism and the counter to this evil was fellow-feeling, or sympathy. He explains: “No matter how powerful the mind, unless there is a concomitant capacity for compassion, there can be no escape from the

sympathy, one must look at how she used the term in some of her writings.<sup>108</sup>

In her writings for the *Westminster Review* (in which she wrote on a number of religious books), she often equated sympathy and morality and used sympathy to mean fellow-feeling by contrasting it with religious dogma. In her essay, “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming” (1855), she railed against dogma that bred harshness and hatred and expressed the need for fellow-feeling. She decried the evangelical preacher’s doctrine pitting his orthodox views—rooted in clannishness (179), immoral doctrines such as that of eternal punishment (182), and “perverted moral judgment” (184)—against moral, sympathetic views. She claimed that his religion “gives a charter to hatred” and “fosters all uncharitableness” (180) and said he “has satisfaction in us only in so far as we exhaust our motives and dispositions of all relation to our fellow-beings, and replace sympathy with men by anxiety for the ‘glory of God’” (186). She affirmed the power of humanity instead: “human nature is stronger and wider than religious systems, and though dogmas may hamper, they cannot absolutely repress its growth” (187). Furthermore, she condemned a lack of sympathy for others as perverted and immoral: “But next to that hatred of the enemies of God which is the principle of

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prison of the self” (4). Creeger considers Eliot’s concept of morality as one of many characteristics of her mindset that finds expression in her writing. His insightful discussion of Eliot’s concept of egoism is tangential to this study but merits mention.

<sup>108</sup> A number of George Eliot critics have written on her concept of sympathy. Most look to her fiction and some to her essays and reviews to discover her understanding of the concept. In *The Marriage of Minds*, Rachel Ablow examines sympathy in relation to marriage plots in the nineteenth-century novel and devotes a chapter to Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*. Forest Pyle in *A Novel Sympathy: The Imagination of Community in George Eliot* and Suzanne Graver in *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* both discuss the necessity of community for sympathy in Eliot’s novels. Audrey Jaffe discusses the link between sympathy and spectacle in *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* and shows how this link is seen in Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, in *George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy*, discusses how Eliot’s notion of sympathy shifts throughout her career by examining *Romola*, *Silas Marner*, and *Felix Holt*. In *Thinking about other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing*, Adela Pinch discusses how nineteenth-century authors moralized about the practice of thinking about other people and how thinking of others can affect them. She explores this thesis in *Daniel Deronda*. In *Victorian Interpretation*, Suzy Anger devotes a chapter to Eliot’s “Hermeneutics of Sympathy” to explain how Eliot’s novels reveal an attempt to create a secular hermeneutic (a hermeneutic of sympathy) in exchange for traditional theological exegesis.

persecution, there perhaps has been no perversion more obstructive of true moral development than this substitution of a reference to the glory of God for the direct promptings of the sympathetic feeling” (187). For Eliot, Dr. Cumming’s perverted concept of God conflicted with human sympathies and hampered moral growth (188). She avowed an alternate view of God as the embodiment of sympathy:

The idea of God is really moral in its influence—it really cherishes all that is best and loveliest in man—only when God is contemplated as sympathizing with the pure elements of human feeling, as possessing infinitely all those attributes which we recognize to be moral in humanity. In this light, the idea of God and the sense of His presence intensify all noble feeling, and encourage all noble effort, on the same principle that human sympathy is found a source of strength: the brave man feels braver when he knows that another stout heart is beating time with his; the devoted woman who is wearing out her years in patient effort to alleviate suffering or save vice from the last stages of degradation, finds aid in the pressure of a friendly hand which tells her that there is one who understands her deeds and in her place would do the like. The idea of a God who not only sympathizes with all we feel and endure for our fellow-men, but who will pour new life into our too languid love, and give firmness to our vacillating purpose, is an extension and multiplication of the effects produced by human sympathy; and it has been intensified for the better spirits who have been under the influence of orthodox Christianity, by the contemplation of Jesus as “God manifest in the flesh.” (187-88)

Here, Eliot echoes Feuerbach’s notion that sympathy between individuals constitutes an idealized principle of a caring God. For Eliot, the idea of God most conducive to developing

human morality was one that embodied sympathy. One who claimed to represent God but could or would not sympathize with his fellow man manifested a false idea of God. Only one who sympathized with others could begin to understand the true idea of God and live a moral, purposeful life.

In her signed fiction (as opposed to her anonymous reviews), Eliot ceased to criticize Christianity expressly in favor of promoting sympathetic relations between characters. Her religious scorn was not heard in her first attempt at fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), or in her subsequent novels. Thomas Pinney explains that Eliot outlined in her essays “the morality of sympathy, self-sacrifice, duty, and resignation that later determines the action and values of her novels” (6), and Ashton notes that her novels “all allow for religious belief and endorse it where it is seen to aid or guide sympathetic action. . . . Though she never returned to Christianity in any of its denominations, she remained interested in forms of worship” (*George Eliot: a Life* 276). By 1859, she revealed a softened attitude toward orthodoxy and a firm belief in the sympathetic function of religion. To Beecher Stowe she described the process of modifying religion to increasingly incorporate a sense of responsibility to fellow humans based on an understanding of their struggles:

I believe that religion too has to be modified—“developed,” according to the dominant phrase—and that a religion more perfect than any yet prevalent, must express less care for personal consolation, and a more deeply-awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with that which of all things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot. I do not find my temple in Pantheism, which, whatever might be its value speculatively, could not yield a practical religion since it is an attempt to look at the universe from the outside of our

relations to it (that universe) as human beings. (*Letters* 5:31)

In this passage, she described the different vision of religion she was developing for herself, a vision that depended on sympathizing with others. Her belief that religion should be based in sympathy accompanied a strengthening sense that one should extend sympathy to those who hold differing views: “I have no longer any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves; on the contrary, I have a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies” (2:230). Eliot sympathized with religions whose collective function was the expression of human sorrow and longing because such a function served to unite people and foster mutual understanding. To Barbara Bodichon she expressed sympathy for all religious systems that offered “lasting meaning” and inspired “sincere faith”:

Pray don't ever ask me again not to rob a man of his religious beliefs, as if you thought my mind tended to such robbery. I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no faith, to have any negative propagandism in me. In fact, I have very little sympathy with Freethinkers as a class, and have lost all interest in mere antagonism to religious doctrines. I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrines from the beginning until now. (*Cross* 2:343)

After a period of disdain for dogma, Eliot developed sympathy for religious faiths that manifested a spirit of mutual compassion.<sup>109</sup> She also expressed sympathy toward religious

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<sup>109</sup> In *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot sympathetically portrays a pagan religion by equating its faith with its community bond. Zarca, leader of the Zincala gypsy tribe explains:

it is a faith  
Taught by no priest, but by their beating hearts.



systems to Walter Cross:

All the great religions of the world historically considered, are rightly the objects of deep reverence and sympathy—they are the record of spiritual struggles which are the types of our own. . . . And in this sense I have no antagonism towards any religious belief, but a strong outflow of sympathy. Every community met to worship the highest Good. . . . carries me along in its main current, and . . . I should go to church or chapel constantly for the sake of the delightful emotions of fellowship which come over me in religious assemblies—the very nature of such assemblies being the recognition of a binding belief or spiritual law. (*Letters* 5:448)

Eliot's appreciation for religions lay in their stories of human struggles, which allowed people to identify and sympathize with the characters, and in their ability to bind together individuals in fellowship.<sup>110</sup> She admired the power of collective belief to unify people and viewed the function of religion as providing an opportunity to gather and worship together “the highest Good.” For Eliot, the value of religion lay not in the particulars of a religious belief system (assuming that the belief system promoted mutual compassion and not division) but rather in the community itself. For her, religion served the sacred function of

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Faith to each other: the fidelity  
 Of fellow-wanderers in a desert place  
 Who share the same dire thirst, and therefore share  
 The scanty water: the fidelity  
 Of men whose pulses leap with kindred fire,  
 Who in the flash of eyes, the clasp of hands,  
 The speech that even in lying tells the truth  
 Of heritage inevitable as past deeds,  
 Nay, in the silent bodily presence feel  
 The mystic stirring of a common life  
 Which makes the many one. (*Poems* 301)

<sup>110</sup> Eliot's poem “Ex Oriente Lux” reflects her respect for other religions. She ascribes greater wisdom and spiritual understanding to Eastern religions by explaining that “While the western world was still “cold and sad / Shivering beneath the whisper of the stars,” “Asia was the earliest home of light” (44). She concludes that “heavenly Thought” was born in the East, not the West (44).

gathering people in a common spirit of mutual understanding. Her appreciation for the unifying role of religion in society thus complemented her personal vision of religion as sympathetic understanding between people.

Eliot's deepening conviction that sympathetic interaction between individuals (and as a collective body) led to moral progress in society prompted her to become a teacher/preacher of sympathy. To Charles Bray, Eliot stated her belief that societal moral progress depended on individuals showing compassion for one another: "My own experience and development deepen every day my conviction that our moral progress may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy" (2:403). She expressed her desire to "touch the hearts of [her] fellow men" (2:416) and to "widen the English vision" (6:304) in the same way that religious stories did. By telling stories, she provided opportunities for the reader to share in the feelings of characters and by extension learn to share in the feelings of fellow humans. She explained to Bray:

If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and to feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures. (3:111)<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Barry Qualls remarks that throughout her life, Eliot relied on the Bible and its typologies and language. She did this to ensure the "representation, and comprehension, of the sacred in her realistic project" (124). Her famous declaration of art, "If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally," stems from "this sense of the necessity of faith in a human being's capacity for love and fellowship achieved through suffering; that is: for a human being's capacity to represent, typologically as it were, the incarnation. Her commitment to the 'typical' in her novels was, as she said, her way of securing her readers' lasting sympathies"

For Eliot, art had a moral function; it enabled readers to learn how to sympathize with fellow humans and bound them together in the same way that religious fellowship bound together members of a community. In “The Natural History of German Life,” Eliot stated:

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions -- about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it is serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of a true one. (*Essays* 271)

For Eliot, the artist’s role was sacred. As a religious leader, the artist’s duty was to teach fellow-feeling and compassion and lead society toward a better moral existence. Eliot fulfilled her sacred, artistic role by promoting sympathetic relations in her works of fiction and poetry.

#### SYMPATHY IN “MID THE RICH STORE OF NATURE’S GIFTS TO MAN”

Throughout her poetry-writing career, Eliot used religious terminology and ideology to further her religion of sympathy. As Barry Qualls states, she “did not write, did not think,

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(124). Qualls is thinking of her novels in this statement; however, we can extend his conclusions to her poetry writing as well. Even though Eliot did not create realistic portrayals in her poetry as she did in her novels, she still believed that the purpose of all art was to tell the truth and to enlarge the sympathies of readers. Her method for truth telling and teaching fellow feeling in novels was realism. Her method for doing the same in poetry was appealing to feminine piety using the poetess tradition.

without the texts that she abandoned when she lost her faith, without the language of the Bible and the traditions that formed around it, without the histories of its texts that she transformed into contexts and structures for the lives of her characters” (120). During her deconversion from Christianity in 1842, Eliot wrote a poem, “Mid the Rich Store of Nature’s Gifts to Man,” in which she relied on Christian language and principles from which she was distancing herself.<sup>112</sup> This early poem reveals the fact that Eliot was already considering the idea of sympathy in her shifting religious views. In this poem, she used the word “sympathy” to mean using one’s special ability to create beauty for the purpose of uplifting humanity. She would develop the idea of sympathy (including the element of fellow-feeling) as a replacement for religion throughout the next two decades.

The context of Eliot’s writing “Mid the Rich Store” is crucial to understanding her meaning. Eliot included this poem in a letter to Maria Lewis (February 18, 1842) about a month after her refusal to go to church with her father and ten days before she wrote to her father explaining her rejection of Christianity (*Letters* 1:124, 126-27, 128-30). Her father tried various means to convince her to change her mind; he became angry and then silent, and then he enlisted the aid of numerous family members, friends, and Christian pastors to

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<sup>112</sup> Eliot’s earliest letters include religious poems—some by her own hand and some by other authors who inspired her. She regularly quoted religious poetry to Maria Lewis: *Letters* 1:5 (two lines from Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*), 1:16-17 (a poem by Baptist minister, John Ryland), 1:27-28 (her own poem, “Knowing that Shortly I must put off this Tabernacle”), 1:30 (her “Sonnet”), 1:69 (her “Question and Answer”), 1:75 (Felicia Hemans’s “A Spirit’s Return”), 1:107 (three lines from Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*), 1:111-12 (an unknown poem followed by “Virtue” by George Herbert). She also included at least one religious poem by Hemans to Martha Jackson in 1841 and two lines of “John Milton’s *L’Allegro* to Mrs. Abijah Hill Pears in 1842. Of all of these poems, only two (“Sonnet” in 1:30 and the unknown poem in 1:111) are not religious. From 1838-1842, she wrote and quoted religious poetry and exchanged heartfelt (orthodox) religious sentiments with her closest friends. She associated poetry and religion throughout these early evangelical years, and when she included “Mid the Rich Store” to Lewis during her transformative phase from orthodoxy toward a religion of sympathy (1842), it was natural for her to convey religious sentiment (albeit changing religious sentiment) via poetry. “Mid the Rich Store” reveals Eliot’s shifting views. The poem relies on the Christian language she always used in poetry, and she would continue to employ Christian terminology and imagery in her poetry as her new belief system emerged.

persuade her to return to obedience to the Christian faith. Eliot's heartfelt letter to her father explaining her apostasy only served to anger him further and resulted in his sending her to Isaac's home to live. In a state of dejection, she wrote the letter to Lewis. She asked: "How go you for society, for communion of spirit, the drop of nectar in the cup of mortals? But why do I say the drop? The mind that feels its value will get large draughts [doses] from some source if denied it in the most commonly chosen way" (1:127).<sup>113</sup> Here Eliot suggested that she felt deprived of human interaction (the common means of achieving "communion of spirit") and sought a less usual way to achieve spiritual communion. She turned to the act of writing to achieve spiritual communion since her society was ostracizing her.<sup>114</sup> After this introduction, she included the poem:

Mid the rich store of nature's gifts to man  
 Each has his loves, close wedded to his soul  
 By fine associations' golden links.  
 As the Great Spirit bids creation teem  
 With conscious being and intelligence,  
 So man His miniature resemblance gives  
 To matter's every form a speaking soul,  
 And emanation from his spirit's fount,  
 The impress true of its peculiar seal.

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<sup>113</sup> Eliot was referring to the myth of Psyche, who became immortal after drinking the nectar of the gods. Eliot's equating communion of spirit and society implies that she believed in the life-giving power of the community. Relating to others gives spiritual meaning to humans as nectar in the myth conferred immortality on Psyche.

<sup>114</sup> After her elopement with Lewes, she would experience even greater societal ostracism. This early lesson in turning to writing as a way to find fulfillment and connectedness would prove useful to the woman who would later be shunned by polite society for her scandalous lifestyle.

Here finds he thy best image, sympathy! (*Poems* 29)

In this poem, the first indication of Eliot's turning to her own idea of sympathy as a substitute for religion, she describes how sympathy develops by showing how humans project themselves onto objects and people around them. Eliot compares the creation of all life with the development of human sympathy; as the Creator imbues creation with consciousness and intelligence, so humans give meaning to all life by projecting their ideas on to "matter's every form." Such life-giving human activity represents the spring of sympathy.<sup>115</sup>

A more complicated reading of the poem shows how Eliot extended the meaning of "sympathy" to consider not just the act of projecting ideas onto matter but also the act of sharing gifts with other people. Eliot uses Christian language to communicate the idea that people find spiritual communion through the act of creating.<sup>116</sup> In the first three lines of the poem, Eliot conveys the simple idea that humans have natural abilities. She expresses this simple statement, however, in words laden with complex Christian implications. Thus she establishes her intent to make a religious statement. She explains that among the abundant supply of "nature's gifts to man" (man's abilities and propensities), humans possess some gifts that they especially love and that connect them "By fine associations' golden links" to others who enjoy those same gifts. These lines allude to the New Testament teaching that the

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<sup>115</sup> Blank verse allows the reader to experience the poem's rhythm as a heartbeat that signals the continuance of life or as a chant that vocalizes a religious creed or sacred statement about the life-giving capacity of sympathy.

<sup>116</sup> In *The Spanish Gypsy*, Zarca's hope for the "race taught by no prophet" is to establish a new land where the tribe will

[Serve] each other's needs, and so be spurred  
To skill in all the arts that succor life;  
Where we may kindle our first altar-fire  
From settled hearths, and call our Holy Place  
The hearth that binds us in one family. (303)

Eliot presents a pagan tribe comprised of individuals who devote their talents to helping the community. The tribe's religion consists in its devotion to one another.

Holy Spirit grants spiritual gifts to the body of Christian believers to fulfill the mission of the Church. Spiritual gifts include prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, mercy (Romans 12:6-8, King James Version), wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, performing miracles, discernment, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues (1 Corinthians 12:8-10), preaching, helping, administration (1 Corinthians 12:28), evangelism, and pastoring (Ephesians 4:11). The Bible teaches that spiritual gifts are special abilities (and works of service) not earned but granted by the Holy Spirit to each Christian believer for the purpose of unifying and building up the body of Christian believers.<sup>117</sup> Eliot used this Christian concept to articulate a message about the potential of the secular community. In Eliot's poem, "nature" (not the Holy Spirit) distributes gifts to humans, and individual humans cherish these gifts ("Each [man] has his loves") and use them for the good of the community. Spiritual gifts are "close wedded to his [man's] soul / By fine associations' golden links." In other words, gifts or special abilities are individual treasures used to connect and enrich the spiritual community. By using the words, "fine association," Eliot refers not only to the ways in which people link ideas to one another and to objects, but she also implies that the use of gifts results in a spiritual and virtuous community connection. According to the *OED*, "fine" used as an adjective can mean "consummate in quality," "pure, refined," "Pure, sheer,

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<sup>117</sup> Paul wrote the following to explain the communal purpose of spiritual gifts: "For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith. . . ." (Romans 12:4-6); "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal [along with the rest] (1 Corinthians 12:7); "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many" (1 Corinthians 12:12-14); "but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked. That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:24-27).

absolute; perfect,” and of persons “consummate in virtue or excellence,” while “association” refers to “the action of combining together for a common purpose” and “a body of persons who have combined to execute a common purpose or advance a common cause.” For Eliot, the gifts wedded to each human’s soul “by fine associations’ golden links” serve to create a pure, virtuous body of persons who have a common goal of excellence, and the gifts these persons exercise also serve to strengthen the community bond. Eliot uses wealth and wedding imagery to impute value to such a bond. The “rich” store of nature’s gifts is “wedded” to souls by “fine” associations’ “golden links” (symbolic of wedding bands). Eliot expresses the value of a united community through wealth and wedding imagery in the same way the Bible does. Revelation 19:7-8 describes the “marriage” of Jesus (bridegroom) and the Church (bride), dressed in “fine linen”: “Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready.<sup>118</sup> And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.”<sup>119</sup>

Eliot thus appeals to New Testament theology to establish early in the poem the unifying potential of humanity’s natural gifts. She then sets up the poem’s controlling analogy, the comparison of the creation of all life with the development of human sympathy. She alludes to the Judeo-Christian creation myth (and perhaps William Paley’s design argument) to describe the creation of life: “As the Great Spirit bids creation teem / With

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<sup>118</sup> Linen symbolizes status and wealth in the Bible (Ryken 514).

<sup>119</sup> Typologists connect this passage (and other such New Testament passages) to Hebrew Scriptures that describe the precious relationship between a king (Jesus) and his bride (the Church). For example: “And the daughter of Tyre [the bride] shall be there with a gift; even the rich among the people shall intreat thy favour. The king's daughter is all glorious within: her clothing is of wrought gold. She shall be brought unto the king in raiment of needlework: the virgins her companions that follow her shall be brought unto thee” (Psalm 45:12-14). Leland Ryken’s *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* fully chronicles the wedding imagery in the Bible.



conscious being and intelligence” (29).<sup>120</sup> She also relies on the prelapsarian principle of humankind’s original perfection laid out in Genesis 1:27 (“So God created man in his own image”) in stating that “man His miniature resemblance gives” (29). She explains that as God fills creation with “conscious being and intelligence,” so humanity, who is like God yet part of creation, has consciousness (awareness, feelings, ability to perceive) and intelligence (capacity to understand the needs of others), and gives “To matter’s every form a speaking soul.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, humans breathe life into everything around them with feelings, perceptions, and intellect by using particular abilities or gifts that nature has bestowed on them.<sup>122</sup> The word “soul” can mean “the principle of life” and also “the seat of the emotions, feelings, or sentiments; the emotional part of man’s nature” (*OED*). By using the word “soul,” Eliot implies that human creation is life-giving in that it provokes an emotional response from whoever experiences the creation and provides the opportunity for that person to connect with the creator and all who partake in the creation. For example, a musician has the special ability to create a piece of music that will provoke an emotional response from the

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<sup>120</sup> Paley was a Christian apologist and philosopher who posited in the influential *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity* (1802) that complex design found in nature necessitated a designer.

<sup>121</sup> According to Feuerbach, humans project their human nature onto God. Possibly Eliot draws on this notion in these lines to depict humans as projecting themselves onto outward objects in a sacred, God-like act of creation.

<sup>122</sup> In her idea of nature’s gifts to man serving to impart beauty to all creation, Eliot may have been influenced by Bray’s *Philosophy*, which states:

Man possesses feelings and intellectual faculties in common with the brutes, and also several in addition; had he been endowed with more propensities and sentiments than those that now belong to him, more senses and intellectual faculties would probably have been necessary, to enable him to bring them into exercise or use. Even now, we cannot but suppose that we view nature with very different eyes from the brutes, and an additional sense or intellectual faculty might have changed the whole appearance that nature now presents to us. The organ of Ideality [according to phrenology, this refers to the faculty of the brain that perceives beauty] may furnish us with an illustration. Man alone is supposed to possess this faculty. It gives feelings which invest nature with a beauty and splendour foreign to the mere properties of objects, as indicated by the intellectual faculties: it ascribes to it an excellence and charm and perfection which are invisible to those creatures that have it not; and the man in whom it is weak, and he in whom it is strong, truly regard nature with different eyes. (100)

listener, and that listener shares in a spiritual experience with the creator of the music and with all who also feel strong emotion when hearing the same music. Eliot also plays on the multiple meanings of “matter” and “form” in this line to underscore the spiritual element. In addition to physical material, “matter” can mean “the characteristic sensible element or sign used in a sacrament (as water in baptism, the laying on of hands in holy orders, etc.),” and in addition to the shape of matter, “form” can refer to “certain essential formulary words” by which the sacrament is effected (*OED*) (such as “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit”). So Eliot employs sacramental terminology to describe the process of humankind’s creation to give human ability divine significance.<sup>123</sup>

Eliot strengthens her claim that human creative ability is sacred by explaining the process as “an emanation from his spirit’s fount.” The creative act flows forth from the human spiritual center just as creation itself flowed from God in the Judeo-Christian creation myth. The emanation from the human spiritual fount implies a sort of reverse baptism. In New Testament theology, the new believer at baptism receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38 and 10:45), and the Holy Spirit gives gifts to the believer to enable participation in the building up of the body of believers.<sup>124</sup> In Eliot’s version of baptism, the human spirit (not the Holy Spirit) is the source of life in the world; by creating, it gives nature (and itself) meaning, and thus new life. Nature gives humanity gifts, and humanity uses those gifts to

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<sup>123</sup> One further layer of meaning might be drawn from this line. “Matter” also means “The substance of a book, speech, etc.” (*OED*). Form can imply “the essential creative quality” of a thing. So, Eliot also can also be referring to the creative quality of her own writing.

<sup>124</sup> Notably, the biblical language associating the Holy Spirit’s descent with flowing water in the baptism passage includes: “And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was *poured out* the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 10:45, emphasis added). Eliot’s use of the words “emanation” and “fount” acknowledges biblical association of water, baptism, and Holy Spirit.

give back to nature.

Human creative ability, according to Eliot, is also “the impress true of its peculiar seal.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, in using special gifts, a person makes a permanent, distinctive mark that represents one’s sincere and best self. This mark is a gift to the world and a symbol of a commitment to the community. As “seal” in the Hebrew Scriptures refers to a symbol of a covenant, “seal” in Eliot’s poem refers to a person’s distinctive creation as a sign of a covenant with the community. In this seal, “man” finds “thy best image, [which is] sympathy!” Humanity’s “best image” is sympathy or the creative ability to bind souls together to make a more unified and virtuous community. Humans manifest the Creator in their special ability to create and impart meaning in the world and so provide opportunities for social and spiritual cohesion. In other words, humans act divinely when they exercise sympathy by offering “communion of spirit” via creation.

After the poem, Eliot wrote in her letter to Lewis:

Beautiful ego-ism! to quote one’s own. But where is not this same ego? The martyr at the stake seeks its gratification as much as the court sycophant, the difference lying in the comparative dignity and beauty of the two egos. People absurdly talk of self-denial—why there is none in Virtue to a being of moral excellence—the greatest torture to such a soul would be to run counter to the dictates of conscience, to wallow in the slough of meanness, deception, revenge or sensuality. This was Paul’s idea in

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<sup>125</sup> Eliot uses the word, “peculiar,” to mean special or distinctive. However, she may have also had in mind another meaning of the word. According to the *OED*, “peculiar” in the nineteenth-century meant “A member of the evangelical wing of the Church of England. A disparaging term used by members of the Oxford Movement.” “Peculiarism” referred to “exclusivity; adherence to a distinctive doctrine or practice.” It is possible that Eliot was gently mocking herself for her former rigid evangelical beliefs.

the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of 2d Ep[istle] to Timothy (I think that is the passage).<sup>126</sup> (*Letters* 1:127)

Eliot was saying that truly moral persons do not consider acting virtuous as self-denial. Moral people enjoy doing or creating for others and detest causing pain (acting unsympathetically) more than anything. It is natural for such persons to feel gratified in performing their beneficial actions. For Eliot, creating for others led to gratification. Her writing the poem was her way to participate in society by producing an edifying, beautiful work of art for the world to enjoy. She was looking for the meaning of morality and personal fulfillment in a time of isolation from her closest associates, who questioned her morality as a non-Christian.<sup>127</sup> In “Mid the Rich Store,” Eliot relied on Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament theology, including the sacraments of baptism and marriage, to claim that humanity enjoys spiritual communion within community by creating and sharing creation.<sup>128</sup> Writing for the community was to become her sacramental expression. By employing religious language to address her English readership, despite her personal disbelief, Eliot demonstrates her sympathy with her readers’ views and her commitment to the moral edification of and participation within the community.

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<sup>126</sup> Her uncertainty of the Bible passage is revealing. She relied on her understanding of the passage but did not need the authority of the passage itself. The exact location in the Bible was no longer relevant for her. She was gaining confidence in her own ideas about morality. In a footnote, Haight explains that Eliot was referring to 2 Timothy 2:5-12 but suggests that her argument is drawn more from Charles Bray’s *The Philosophy of Necessity* than the biblical passage (*Letters* 1:127). Haight’s statement is probable given the fact that Eliot read Bray’s work in December 1841 following Hennell’s *Inquiry* (Haight 40).

<sup>127</sup> Charles Bray stated in *Philosophy*: “Man has been endowed with certain propensities and sentiments on which his happiness has been made to depend, for their exercise is attended with highly pleasurable sensations, the aggregate of which constitutes happiness” (97-98). Eliot may have had this idea in mind when writing this poem.

<sup>128</sup> In light of Eliot’s apostasy, Eliot’s father and Maria Lewis did not take communion when they went to church together on January 2, 1842. Perhaps this fact (presumably told to her by Lewis or her father) inspired the inclusion of sacraments in her poem.

SYMPATHY IN “O MAY I JOIN THE CHOIR INVISIBLE”

Eliot understood sympathy in 1842 to mean something like sharing oneself in service to the community. After “Mid the Rich Store,” she did not write poetry again (except the short “As Tu Vu” in 1849) until 1865 when her notion of sympathy had matured.<sup>129</sup> Her growing confidence in sympathy as a worthy tenet for moral living prepared her for writing poetry. Like many nineteenth-century poets, Eliot used the poetic form to explore religious issues. She took advantage of the prevalent notion of poet as prophet to adopt a prophetic persona and profess sacred and moral truth.<sup>130</sup> She also relied on the poetess tradition—one

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<sup>129</sup> Written from Geneva shortly after her father’s death, “As Tu Vu” expresses admiration for the beauty of the noble soul. Van den Broek speculates that Cross omitted the section of the letter that includes the poem because he (as did Haight) considered it bad French verse (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:27). The letter included a note to Sara Hennell explaining that the poem was for an album that the Marquise de St. Germain was compiling: “Thank you for your scrap of L.E.L. I have been invoking the French muse for the Marquise’s album—since she would fain have something and it must not be in English which she cannot understand. It will make you smile—so I write it” (*Letters* 298). After the poem, she wrote: “I thought it would have done admirably to put in Molière’s *Misanthrope* or *Precieuses ridicules*. But the thought, dear soul, is a very true one, above all when I apply it to you. Receive it as just what I am feeling and thinking about you” (299). Eliot’s associating her French verse with Molière’s comedies of manners reveals a gentle self-mocking regarding her ability to write poetry in French. She hoped that despite the poem’s limitations Sara would feel her sentiment. I did not find a translation for this poem, but roughly it reads as follows:

Did you see the moon rising  
 In an azure sky without veil?  
 A thousand dew drops reflect  
 Its light like as many stars  
 A spring violet is picked  
 And hidden well in your breast  
 Of the delicious smell  
 You and your clothing will be full  
 Thus when a noble soul is shown  
 Wearing so much of its charms  
 So let us keep its memory  
 Though, alas! It brings us to tears.

In this poem, Eliot compares the noble soul (such as that of Sara and perhaps also of her father) to the beauty of a sea of dew drops reflecting the moon’s light like stars and to the delight of a flower that has been tucked inside one’s coat and fills the clothing with an intoxicating aroma. The memory of a loved one has the ability to bring us to tears of sadness (because of the loved one’s absence) and of joy (because of the beauty and pleasure-giving ability of the memory).

<sup>130</sup> Charles Laporte states: “Eliot embraces stereotypically feminine poetic models as an influence that should change the cultural landscape, and even have a guiding influence akin to that of the Bible” (“Poetess as Prophet” 159). This astute comment takes into consideration Eliot’s association of poet(ess) and prophet(ess).

that associated women poets with sympathy and religion—to promote her belief in living morally by treating others with fellow-feeling. But it was not until after she rejected, decried, and then softened toward Christianity that she began writing poetry in earnest. With a mature mindset towards religion and a strong belief in the ability of humans to make a better society by living sympathetically, Eliot became a poetess.<sup>131</sup>

Eliot's first publication "Knowing that Shortly I must put off this Tabernacle" was a religious poem.<sup>132</sup> The poem was first published in 1840 in the *Christian Observer*.<sup>133</sup>

"Knowing," when contrasted with "O May I Join the Choir Invisible," published in 1867, shows the change in Eliot's religious beliefs from her early evangelical phase to her mature belief in sympathy as a religion. In both poems, Eliot begins with an epigraph to introduce

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She viewed art as sacred and the role of artist as spiritual guide. Her writing could influence culture as if was a holy text. He also notes Eliot's friend Harriet Beecher Stowe's observation, "That pure ideal of a sacred woman springing from the bosom of the family, at once wife, mother, poetess, leader, inspirer, prophetess, is peculiar to sacred history" and that Eliot capitalized on this connection in her poetry (*Letters* 165).

<sup>131</sup> Laporte astutely points out that Eliot presented herself as a poetess only after she attained cultural and literary status in the late 1860s and early 1870s, but her belief in the idea that the poetess's work should be intellectually challenging and unapologetically feminine originated in the mid-1850s. He looks to Eliot's review of *Aurora Leigh* to make this claim:

[In] her criticism, Eliot appropriates for the poetess...the cultural weight of a supposedly male tradition without jettisoning the figure as one of tenderness, domesticity, and sentimentality. In her opinion, *Aurora Leigh* 'superadds' one discourse to another. Eliot believed in a feminine ideal that embraces what Swinburne calls 'the whole nature of things' without leaving the 'sweet circle of domestic affections' presumed to contain the poetess tradition. And her reconciliation of these ostensibly different perspectives is the more powerful because she herself possessed the 'vigor, breadth, and culture' which she praised in *Aurora Leigh*, and the English lack of which she would caricature in her prose. ("Poetess as Prophet" 161)

<sup>132</sup> Eliot's first recorded poem, "On Being Called a Saint," written in 1834 (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:3), was first published in Haight's biography (20). Eliot wrote six poems between 1834-1849 ("On Being Called," "Knowing that Shortly I must put off this Tabernacle," "Sonnet," "Question and Answer," "Mid the Rich Store of Nature's Gifts to Man," and "As Tu Vu la Lune se Lever") and then did not write poetry again until she began *The Spanish Gypsy* in 1864. During the poetry-writing lapse, she wrote the bulk of her fiction. Once she began writing poetry again, she did so consistently until 1879, the year before her death.

<sup>133</sup> Eliot sent this poem in a letter to Maria Lewis in 1839 with the following note:

I thank you very heartily for your kind note, and I send you in return some doggerel lines, the crude fruit of a lonely walk last evening, when the words of one of our martyrs occurred to me. You must be acquainted with the idiosyncrasy of my authorship, which is that my effusions, once committed to paper, are like the laws of the Medes and Persians that alter not. My attempt at poetry will serve to amuse you, if no more, and you love a laugh so well that it would be ungenerous to withhold the occasion of one. (*Letters* 1:27)

the themes of death and immortality. In “Knowing,” the poem’s epigraph (and title) is a quote from 2 Peter 1:14. Appropriately, she uses a biblical passage to discuss her longing to bid “farewell!” to earth’s gifts, including natural beauties, books, and creatures of the air. She repeats “farewell!” at the end of each stanza to emphasize the finality of her departure and separation from the world after her earthly life. The only things she will not say farewell to are the “Blest volume” and “Dear kindred,” whom she will meet in heaven (*Poems* 26). In this poem, Eliot expresses the Christian longing for heaven described in 2 Peter. In contrast, Eliot begins “O May I Join” with an epigraph not from the Bible, but from Cicero’s *Letters to Atticus* (book 12, letter 18) in which he expresses his longing to carry on the memory of his daughter: “*Longum illud tempus, quum non ero, magis me movet, quam hoc exiguum*” (I am more concerned about the long ages, when I shall not be here, than about my short day).<sup>134</sup>

The young Eliot believed so strongly in the sanctity of the Bible that she wanted to take it with her to heaven. The mature Eliot believed in the sanctity of art, and so for her, Cicero’s letter was just as holy as Peter’s.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Cicero’s entire sentence reads: “I am more concerned about the long ages, when I shall not be here, than about my short day, which, short though it is, seems all too long to me” (35). Martha Vogeler correctly points out the significance of the role of memory in “O May I Join.” Eliot hoped, as Cicero hoped for his daughter, to carry on George Lewes’s memory after his death. She arranged for Unitarian minister Dr. Thomas Sadler to conduct Lewes’s funeral at Highgate Cemetery chapel and established a Studentship in Physiology at Cambridge in Lewes’s name. Eliot was also concerned with her own immortality. She looked to survive in the memories of her future readers. She placed “O May I Join” at the end of the collected poems in *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* to emphasize the poem’s significance, as Tennyson would do with “Crossing the Bar” (65). Vogeler also points out the positivist traits of the poem, explaining that of her poems, “it comes closest to Comte’s conception of a new religion in its reliance on memory and meditation as agents of grace and its idealization of the dead as inspiration for the living—termed by Comte ‘subjective immortality.’ His concomitant assumptions George Eliot also shares: that only the worthy survive in memory and only the good influences the future” (75). However, Vogeler emphasizes that Eliot was not a positivist and that her poem reflects her own ideas more than Comte’s.

<sup>135</sup> It is believed that Peter wrote his letter to the Christians of Asia Minor in either 63-65 or 150 CE to warn against false teachers, heretics, corrupt morals, and the end of the world. He wrote to encourage the new converts to practice virtue and turn from false teachers. Some reject the authenticity of Peter’s letter. Cicero wrote his letter to his friend, Atticus, in 65 BCE while grieving the loss of his beloved daughter, Tullia.

Both poems address the themes of death and immortality. In “Knowing,” Eliot emphasizes leaving behind earthly things after death and anticipates heaven, a place where she will “find new joy, / New sounds, new sights” (26). By this means, Eliot expresses longing for the New Testament conception of heaven. In “O May I Join,” Eliot longs not for the Christian heaven, a place distinct from earth, but for a different kind of heaven, a living in perfect sympathy with others:

O may I join the choir invisible  
 Of those immortal dead who live again  
 In minds made better by their presence: live  
 In pulses stirred to generosity,  
 In deeds of daring rectitude, in scorn  
 For miserable aims that end with self,  
 In thoughts sublime that pierce the night like stars,  
 And with their mild persistence urge man’s search  
 To vaster issues.  
 So to live is heaven (49)

Eliot longs to “join the choir invisible,” a community of people who lived sympathetically and made other lives better by their presence. This community may include persons past or present who immortalized themselves by showing others how to live more generously and accomplishing “deeds of daring rectitude” (49).<sup>136</sup> The choir invisible despises selfish aims

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<sup>136</sup> In “George Eliot: The Poetess as Prophet,” Charles Laporte reads “O May I Join” as a hymn to literature’s influence on humanity. Laporte’s reading is correct but not complete. The poem is a hymn to sympathy; it preaches the way to live on in the lives of others through sympathetic acts. Literature is just one way (and it is Eliot’s way) to attain that everlasting goal. The choir invisible exerts its influence on, and



and urges humanity to search for “vaster issues” to create a better society (49). Eliot’s heaven involves living sympathetically and teaching others how to do the same for the betterment of humanity.

Although no longer orthodox in her religious beliefs at the time of writing “O May I Join,” Eliot still relies on religious terminology and imagery. She incorporates sin, guilt, forgiveness, justification, sanctification, salvation, sainthood, charity, and fellowship in her portrayal of the process of joining the choir invisible and attaining her idea of heaven. Martha Vogeler states: “The omnipresent Choir constitutes a secular version of the communion of saints; the fellowship of its holy spirits is poured out upon all who believe in them” (67). In Eliot’s heaven, humanity makes moral progress by living in perfect harmony and unity: “So to live is heaven: / To make undying music in the world, / Breathing as beauteous order that controls/ With growing sway the growing life of man” (49). Little by little humans become better as they are influenced by the “beauteous order” of the choir’s “undying music” (49). Humans influenced by the choir go through a justification and sanctification process as they join the choir themselves:

So we inherit that sweet purity

For which we struggled, failed, and agonized

With widening retrospect that bred despair.<sup>137</sup>

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includes, living humanity. By the end of the poem, Eliot (still alive) declares herself a part of the choir by the creation of the poem. The choir’s inclusion of living humanity performing acts of sympathy and compassion is clear by its focus not only on “those immortal dead” and “martyred men,” but also the living who perform “deeds of daring rectitude” and have “thoughts sublime” (49-50). “So to live [now] is heaven,” says Eliot. For her, the choir includes those living and dead who participate in creating the “undying music in the world” (49).

<sup>137</sup> Eliot wrote to Charles Ritter in response to his French translation of “O May I Join” in *Fragments et Pensées* (Geneva 1979). She explained the “widening retrospect that bred despair” phrase: “Life is necessarily a widening retrospect as we look back upon it—a journey which we ‘lay behind’ us as we advance. To many of us—I hope not to you—it is a retrospect of broken resolutions which make each succeeding resolution less

Rebellious flesh that would not be subdued,  
 A vicious parent shaming still its child  
 Poor anxious penitence, is quick dissolved;  
 Its discords, quenched by meeting harmonies,  
 Die in the large and charitable air (49)

Here Eliot describes the collective purification process of the choir, relying on Christian terminology and putting a twist on Christian doctrine. Members do not earn but rather “inherit” purity; that is, the choir breathes the music of the world into the life of other humans, making them righteous or justified. Then humans go through a sanctification process as they learn to live a life worthy of sainthood. Eliot turns to the example of a vicious parent shaming a child to exemplify the “rebellious flesh that would not be subdued” (49). Eliot’s portraying an abusive parent as the best illustration of a particularly distasteful sin that results in guilt and forgiveness is a useful reminder to her reader of her role as a poetess who represents domestic and spiritual goodness. (Poetesses often relied on the image of a loving parent and child in their poetry.) Cruelty to a child represents the antithesis of sympathy. However, the guilt that results from unsympathetic behavior can be overcome with the help of the choir that increasingly sways “the growing life of man” through harmonious and charitable actions (49). The saints in the choir encourage and uplift the new member(s) by performing acts of charity. Sins are “quenched by meeting harmonies,” “die in the large and charitable air” (49), and are thus forgiven.

The purification process results in a collective better self, one that is sympathetic and

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hopeful, and in this way breed ‘despair.’ The words are precise, to one who has had the experience” (*Letters* 7:56).

“divinely human” (49):

And all our rarer, better, truer self,  
 That sobbed religiously in yearning song,  
 That watched to ease the burthen of the world  
 Laboriously tracing what must be,<sup>138</sup>  
 And what may yet be better—saw within  
 A worthier image for the sanctuary,  
 And shaped it forth before the multitude  
 Divinely human, raising worship so  
 To higher reverence more mixed with love—(49-50)

Vogeler interprets this passage as a representation of the Eucharist. She states:

The Eucharist seems to be suggested by the image clusters of a “sanctuary” (the chancel and altar), of a shaping “forth before the multitude” and “raising worship” to “higher reverence” (the public elevation and adoration of the elements), “mixed with love” (the wine and water); while in the midst of these phrases the words “divinely human” characterize the mystery the sacrament celebrates. (70)<sup>139</sup>

Vogeler’s insightful interpretation points out the various ways in which Eliot incorporates Christian elements to convey an unorthodox religious notion. In the above passage, Eliot

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<sup>138</sup> Eliot explains to Charles Ritter: “The ‘must be’ you have rightly translated. . . . The great division of our lot is that between what is immovable and is the object of resignation and that which is modifiable by hopeful activity—by new conceptions and new deeds” (*Letters* 7:56).

<sup>139</sup> Vogeler also points out the apocalyptic elements in this passage of the poem: “That better self shall live till human Time / Shall fold its eyelids, and the human sky / Be gathered like a scroll within the tomb / Unread forever.” She states: “the Apocalypse seems to lie behind the cosmic imagery with which the strophe concludes. Even the Choir Invisible, it suggests, is not, after all, eternal: it lives only so long as the race and its world—‘human time’ and the ‘human sky’—prevail. The metaphor of a scroll ‘unread forever’ must have been particularly painful for a writer!” (70).

describes the community (that may be taking communion) as one “self.” This collective entity is the choir that sobs “religiously in yearning song” and finds ways to ease the burden of the world and make it a better place. The choir is religious because of its moral actions toward others. The “better, truer self” sees within a “worthier image for the sanctuary” and raises worship to “higher reverence” that is “mixed with love” (49-50). Eliot’s choir is a past and present community of people who live and have lived sympathetically. They worship together in holy fellowship as they act with sympathy and remember others who have done the same. For Eliot, the choir invisible is a community of people living in perfect harmony with one another and with the memory of saints who have died but live on in memory. The choir is divine humanity. The choir is heaven.

Eliot concludes the poem by finding her place in the choir invisible:

This is life to come,  
 Which martyred men have made more glorious  
 For us who strive to follow. May I reach  
 That purest heaven, be to other souls  
 The cup of strength in some great agony,  
 Enkindle generous ardor, feed pure love,  
 Beget the smiles that have no cruelty,  
 Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,<sup>140</sup>  
 And in diffusion ever more intense!

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<sup>140</sup> This line reminds the reader of the final description of Dorothea in *Middlemarch*: “But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (838).

So shall I join the choir invisible

Whose music is the gladness of the world. (50)

She hopes to live a life worthy of the choir, to reach “purest heaven” by being compassionate, generous, and loving to others. By writing the poem, an immortal hymn to sympathy, she participates in the choir invisible. In the poem she preaches sympathetic living as the way to heaven and guides other souls to a sacred way of life. Whereas she begins the poem “*O may I join the choir invisible,*” she declares confidently at the hymn’s conclusion “*So shall I join the choir invisible / Whose music is the gladness of the world*” (50, emphasis added).

This final stanza includes the phrases “purest heaven,” “pure love,” “sweet presence,” “good diffused,” all expressions that are also representative of nineteenth-century femininity. Laporte aptly remarks on Eliot’s use of domestic and sentimental terminology that Victorians associated with femininity. Eliot desires to be “*felt* as a nurse to the sick in spirit, to enkindle generosity, to engender love. This humanistic sentimentality is one of the hallmarks of the poetess tradition” (“Poetess as Prophet” 162).<sup>141</sup> The poetess tradition relied on Christian morality to advance culture. Eliot takes Christian terminology and theology and recycles it as feminine piety to preach a religion of sympathy. In so doing, she seeks to immortalize herself in the minds of her readers and leave a sacred message to guide generations to come.

## CONCLUSION

Laporte explains that “English poetesses often turned to biblical subjects because the

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<sup>141</sup> Laporte also notes that Eliot’s invocations of “purest heaven,” “great agony,” and “pure love” are in accord with her desire to share in the “sweet presence of a good diffused.” The poetess tradition relied on such recycled tropes of feminine piety (“Poetess as Prophet” 162).

Bible afforded them examples of female prophetic authority, an authority made particularly compelling by the quasi-divine moral perspective credited to many women in nineteenth-century culture” (*Victorian Poets* 213). Eliot was no exception. With her knowledge of the Bible and a firm understanding of her society’s expectations for female authorship, she consciously participated in a tradition of women poets who relied on feminine piety and poetry to help refine society through compassion and fellow-feeling. Eliot wrote religious poetry throughout her career, but she wrote earnestly as a poetess only after she rejected and then softened her views on Christianity and developed her own religion of sympathy. Eliot came to appreciate the language, lessons, and stories of the faith she once rejected, and she incorporated them into her poetry to preach a religion of sympathy to her readers. Through her poems, she reached out to the reader in ways she did not attempt in her fiction. She adopted a different persona—that of a poetess—and mingled religious terminology and secular ideas to convey a doctrine of sympathy. Readers then and now experience a fuller understanding of the author’s work and message by reading her poetry in addition to her fiction. Nineteenth-century and contemporary minds are made better by the presence of one “immortal dead” who lives again to spur us on to “deeds of daring rectitude” and “thoughts sublime” from the choir invisible.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## George Eliot and Poetess Conventions: Female Community and Motherhood

Little maidens old, sweet dreams!  
 Sleep one sleep till morning beams.  
 Mothers ye, who help us all,  
 Quick at hand, if ill befall.  
 Holy Gabriel, lily-laden,  
 Bless the aged mother maiden  
 -George Eliot

In chapters two and three, I argued that Eliot consciously engaged in the nineteenth-century poetess tradition by appealing to feminine piety to express her opinions on gender issues and convey a doctrine of sympathy. Like other nineteenth-century women poets, Eliot relied on poetess conventions that were associated with a stance of sympathy. This association provided Eliot with a means through which she could express unorthodox religious ideas with the traditional religious authority ascribed to the poetess. Having established Eliot's views on gender and religion and her participation in the poetess tradition to convey these views in ways unseen in her fiction, I will in chapter four expand on her participation in the poetess tradition, focusing on her treatment of the themes of female community and motherhood to convey her doctrine of sympathy. I will discuss in detail how Eliot relied on these themes in *Armstrong* and "Agatha" to construct an image of herself as mother to her readers and to promote compassion in the community.

By turning to the themes of domesticity and motherhood, Eliot connected herself to a community of women writers who postured themselves as poetic mothers who negotiated a sphere of domestic influence in Victorian England. Joseph Bristow, Isobel Armstrong, Angela Leighton, Susan Brown, and other Victorian scholars all trace the nineteenth-century

poetess tradition to Felicia Hemans and Leticia Landon (L.E.L.), early nineteenth-century poets who influenced subsequent women poets, and who thereby helped to establish a community of women poets who relied on, and at times referred to, one another in their poetry.<sup>142</sup> A young Eliot cherished the “sweet” language” of Mrs. Hemans (*Letters* 1:109) and found in her “a mothering voice and a sweetness of phrase and message which seemed to speak of the very nature of woman” (Leighton 16). Hemans scripted a sweet, domestic image of herself through her poetry that hid the fact that she lived her life as a middle class woman separated from her husband and without protection. As a mature writer, Eliot similarly deflected attention from her personal life by carefully cultivating an image of herself as a spiritual guide and mother in her poetry. Though she distanced herself from silly lady novelists, she identified with great poetesses. She expressed deep admiration for the “feminine subtlety of perception,” “feminine quickness of sensibility,” and “feminine tenderness” of Barrett Browning (“Belles Lettres” 306). As a mature writer, Eliot sought to distinguish herself as a great poetess in the likeness of Barrett Browning and appealed to the feminine tradition of women poets to achieve this aim. By addressing domestic themes and writing in a consciously feminine mode, Eliot identified with a community of women poets who had the power to comfort, console, and counsel.

## POETESS CONVENTIONS

Chapter one summarized scholarly discussions of the poetess tradition, including the

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<sup>142</sup> Hemans and Landon were two influential mothers of the kind Barrett Browning sought when she said, “I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none” (*Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 1:232). Barrett Browning read Hemans and L.E.L. but did not credit them as literary grandmothers. Bristow explains that though these women clearly influenced Barrett Browning, she disparaged their focus on love and their artificial style (5).



meaning of the term “poetess,” the societal role of women poets, the persona of the poetess, the cohesiveness of women poets, and feminine conventions of women’s poetry writing. This chapter extends the discussion of the conventions that women poets used. Some critics resist categorizing the conventions of women’s writing for fear that such categories will diminish women poets’ individuality; however, as I argued in chapter one, such categorization does not deny poetic diversity. Participation in the poetess tradition allowed women to stand on an established platform to further independent ideas.

By the nineteenth-century, women poets oftentimes engaged in a mode of writing poetry that was associated with the domestic sphere and exerted influence within defined moral and religious conventions. Isobel Armstrong argues that women poets turned to affect as a dominant mode of expression, employed a feminine voice, and participated in a well-established poetess tradition.<sup>143</sup> Women poets could negotiate their own sphere of influence and communicate subversive ideas in a feminine, sentimental way easily accepted by society, not to fit into a safe stereotype but rather to negotiate societal conventions and constraints, to create a voice, and to earn a living. Women poets could escape a societally prescribed feminine identity, protect against self-exposure, and control their objectification by using travel, masks, and role-play, and by setting poems in “other” lands—emotional spaces outside the rules of the poet’s nationality and culture (*Victorian Poetry* 324-25).<sup>144</sup> Travel

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<sup>143</sup> Armstrong asserts that affect was the dominant mode of poetry in the early and mid-nineteenth-century because the period was rife with fear of revolution, class and racial bitterness. She explains that in a divided society, women were given the duty of expressing feeling “which would disguise the rifts of a fractured society with pity and empathy” (“Msrepresentation” 9).

<sup>144</sup> For example, George Eliot’s *The Spanish Gypsy*, Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, and Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata* all place heroines in distant lands where they escape gendered restrictions of their home culture and seek a “universal womanhood which transcends cultural differences” (“Msrepresentation” 325). Women’s poems of displacement allowed for expressive feeling, and affective expression could serve to reveal or to conceal.

and foreign settings allowed women writers to search for the exotic, escape restrictions, or discover a “universal womanhood which transcends cultural differences” (325). Armstrong explains that women adopted a feminine way of writing, “a music of [their] own,” that might have been pious, simple, and/or “feminine” (323). Women writers looked back to precursors, such as L.E.L and Hemans, and worked within an identifiable tradition of feminine writing. Armstrong explains that the politics of women’s poetry in the nineteenth-century was not associated with particular political positions but “rather with a set of strategies or negotiations with conventions and constraints” (332). She traces similarities throughout women’s writing to show that expressive theory was tied to feminine poetics. For example, she states:

It is remarkable how resourcefully the three Brontës, each of them highly individual writers . . . follow Mrs. Hemans in exploring consciousness under duress, imprisoned within limit, or how Anne Adelaide Procter . . . follows Letitia Landon in exploring the alien rituals of another culture in her tales, and the demands of either moral or affective conventions in her shorter lyrics. . . . (332)

She discusses the works of these authors as well as Barrett Browning, Dora Greenwell, and Christina Rossetti to establish a women’s tradition of expressive poetics in the early and mid-nineteenth-century. She turns to the works of Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, Mathilde Blind, and George Eliot to discuss how women poets writing in the latter part of the century adopted a poetics of myth and mask.<sup>145</sup> Armstrong asserts that the “music” of the Victorian woman poet could be listened to “through the dissonances women’s poetry created by making

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<sup>145</sup> Though Armstrong is correct in situating Eliot, the poetess, in the latter part of the century, Eliot wrote poetry throughout her career, and her feminine poetic style does not fit neatly into a latter-century categorization.

problematical the affective conventions and feelings associated with a feminine modality of experience even when, and perhaps particularly when, poets worked within these conventions” (323).<sup>146</sup> Bernard Richards disagrees with Armstrong’s case for women poets’ creating a language of their own, asserting that women merely coped with an inherited language rather than reinvented a new language (224). However, I think that Armstrong makes a solid case. Women poets used domestic, feminine language and created expressions that other women then used.<sup>147</sup> The reader came to associate such language with the poetess.

Richards does, however, agree with Armstrong’s idea that women poets shared similar conventions. He says that women poets were alike in that they acted as creators, were recipients of the male gaze, and wrote about love, repression, suffering, sexuality, longing for heaven, and communality (209-26). In *Writing Against the Heart*, Angela Leighton also acknowledges a self-conscious tradition of women poets who embraced similar literary conventions and modes of expression, arguing that women poets influenced one another and that Hemans and L.E.L. were precursors for a feminine tradition of speaking from the heart.<sup>148</sup> Women who followed Hemans and L.E.L. sought to fit their imaginative experiences into an established connection between feminine emotional life and poetry

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<sup>146</sup> Armstrong also argues that in repeatedly following feminine conventions, the poetess could critique those very conventions by drawing attention to them through exaggerated and patterned usage (“MsRepresentation 20”).

<sup>147</sup> For example, poetesses often used the adjective “sweet” (as in “sweet enforcement,” “sweet home,” “sweet antiphony,” “sweet instruments,” “sweet hay,” “sweet repose,” and “sweet dreams” in Eliot’s “Agatha” and “sweet repose,” “sweet nature,” “sweet peace,” “sweet home,” “sweet welcome,” “sweet endearments,” “sweet guardians,” and “sweet communion,” in Felicia Hemans’s “The Domestic Affections,” two poems about home).

<sup>148</sup> In *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry*, Hughes discusses the poetic tradition of speaking from the heart in her chapter “Poetry and the Heart’s Affections,” in which she explains that Victorian sentimentality and the appeal to the heart can be understood in the context of religion, domestic ideology, and commercialization (167). “Poetry,” she states, “had long been considered the preserve of pathos . . . through its link to song, and secular concepts of sympathy reinforced appeals to the responsive heart associated with Victorian piety. . . . The heart . . . was at once an organ of piety, secular morality, intellection, and aesthetic experience” (167).

writing. In addition to Hemans and L.E.L., Leighton discusses Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Augusta Webster, Michael Field, Alice Meynell, and Charlotte Mew to show that women's poetry of the nineteenth-century, more than the novel, "was written and read as part of a self-consciously female tradition" (1). Leighton does not include Eliot's poetry in this book or in the anthology she co-edited with Margaret Reynolds, *Victorian Women Poets*; however, her discussion of the women's tradition of poetry-writing provides a useful model by which to assess Eliot's role as a woman poet. One can easily find similarities between Eliot, Hemans, and L.E.L. Eliot read Hemans (*Letters* 1:72, 75, 109) and embraced her feminine, domestic sensibility in her poems, and like L.E.L., she had a sexually transgressive lifestyle. However, unlike L.E.L., she avoided drawing attention to herself by avoiding autobiographical references in her poetry (with the exception of "Brother and Sister" and, some would argue, *Armgarth*). Eliot associated with common themes and preoccupations of women poets but did not want her audience connecting her life and her work. She avoided self-display in her poetry because she was sensitive to criticism and did not want attention to her lifestyle to overshadow her role as spiritual guide to her readers.

Susan Brown discusses the communal voice of the poetess by invoking Sappho as the original precedent for the poetess and by pointing out the fact that her reputation more than her poetry elicited critical attention:

The fragmented voice of the writer whom the ancients respected as the progenitor of lyric was largely obscured as commentators focused attention on her deeply unhappy biographical legend. In practice this meant that there was little basis for aesthetic judgment of poetesses' work but their lives were scrutinized for conformity to perceived womanly and poetic standards, however conflicting those might be.

Sappho's putative biography conveniently enshrined the antagonism between respectable femininity and poetic aspiration. (184)

The poetess, explains Brown, speaks in the voice of Sappho and others (Corinee, Eulalie, Beatrice, Properzia Rossi, etc.). The poetess voice for Hemans, L.E.L., and their successors "took the form of a self-consciously feminine self-staging in verse that appropriated many bodies, lives, and identities" (184). Eliot understood the value of identifying with the voice of the poetess. Through careful self-staging, she embraced the model of the poetess that embodied respectable femininity and avoided the scandalous model that was associated with passion, ambition, and immodest public display.

Margaret Reynolds points out Eliot's reliance on "a shared set of formulas and themes which were learned by all the Victorian women poets from their reading, especially, of the many annuals and album books designed for a female readership—an audience which certainly included George Eliot given her close knowledge of *The Keepsake* for 1832" (*Oxford Reader's Companion* 305).<sup>149</sup> Eliot's interest in poetess themes stemmed from her own life experience. She struggled with depression and headaches throughout her life as a result of anxiety and relentless self-doubt. She was painfully conscious of her plain looks, the cause of rejection by John Chapman and Herbert Spencer, and she feared becoming a spinster (Ashton, *Oxford Companion* 216-18, 220-21). When she boldly commenced the liaison with Lewes, she suffered the rejection of her family and society.<sup>150</sup> Writing, too,

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<sup>149</sup> Reynolds points out that Eliot complained about the "effeminate feebleness of the 'Keepsake' style" (*Essays* 268) in "The Natural History of German Life" (*Oxford Reader's Companion* 305).

<sup>150</sup> Eliot wrote to Bray in September 1855 to defend her view of marriage:

If we differ on the subject of the marriage laws, I at least can believe of you that you cleave to what you believe to be good, and I don't know of anything in the nature of your views that should prevent you from believing the same of me. How far we differ I think we neither of us know; for I am ignorant

provided an endless source of anxiety. Eliot took on a male pseudonym to protect herself from detractors who would denigrate her work based on her reputation as a fallen woman. Hiding her identity suited her because she had a deeply-ingrained fear of failure. Extremely self-conscious and often in need of reassurance, she worried about not writing well and about the criticism of her work. Throughout her adult life, she regularly faced rejection and alienation. It was not until her fame (secured with the publication of *Middlemarch* in 1871-72) that society overcame the shock of learning the true identity of the author of the religiously themed *Scenes of Clerical Life* and the exemplary *Adam Bede* and allowed the novelist to enjoy a measure of acceptance in society. Social acceptance allowed Eliot credibility to embark on a new path. Writing as a poetess, she transformed her pains and troubles into an impulse to convey the redemptive value of sympathy in poetry. She would relay that message using a tradition that positioned her as a spiritual leader with domestic inclinations, and she would do so without reminding her readers of her lifestyle. Avoiding attention to her actual life, she constructed an image of herself as the sympathetic poetess who guides her readers in matters of spirituality.

As a poetess, Eliot appealed to feminine conventions to elicit the sympathy of her readers. She used feminine language, addressed poetess themes (such as suffering, alienation, renunciation, and duty), set poems in foreign lands, and incorporated religious terminology and concepts (such as the afterlife, prophecy, and redemption) to teach compassion. By teaching readers to understand and respond to the suffering and feelings of others, she

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of your precise views and apparently you attribute to me both feelings and opinions which are not mine. We cannot set each other quite right on this matter in letters, but one thing I can tell you in few words. 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. (*Letters* 2:214)

encouraged a collective community and a better society, one that would embrace fellow members rather than alienate them based on arbitrary rules of social decorum. Two poetess themes found often in Eliot's poetry include female community and motherhood. I will discuss how Eliot depended on these two themes to construct an image of herself as both spiritual guide and mother and to promote compassion in the community.

### ELIOT AND FEMALE COMMUNITY

Female community provided not only the poetic inspiration for Eliot's mode of poetry writing but also the actual experiences that helped shape her belief in the value of sympathetic understanding between people. Her early adult relationships with women were very affectionate and sometimes intense. In 1828, her parents sent her to Mrs. Wallington's Boarding School in Nuneaton, where she formed a close friendship with Maria Lewis, the principal governess at the school. Lewis became the most important influence in Eliot's life by imparting her evangelical zeal and encouraging Eliot to read the Bible. They continued their affectionate relationship through letters after Eliot left Nuneaton to go to Franklins' School in Coventry.<sup>151</sup> With Lewis, she shared daily routines, feelings, frustrations, insecurities, and poetry that she wrote and read, and her language was often religious. But when Eliot turned against Christianity, they no longer shared a religious bond and their

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<sup>151</sup> Eliot nicknamed her women friends to show affection. She referred to Lewis as "Veronica," explaining to her that the name meant "fidelity in friendship" (*Letters* 1:68). Similarly, she nicknamed school-friend Martha (or Patty) Jackson "Ivy" to signify constancy (1:60). Her own nickname, which she signed when writing to both Lewis and Jackson, was "Clematis" (mental beauty). She later called Cara Bray "My own dear Heart's Ease" and frequently referred to Sara Hennell as "Lieber Gemahl" (My Dear Spouse) and "Beloved Achates" (faithful friend of Aeneas) (1:145, 1:161, 1:207).

friendship faded.<sup>152</sup>

Eliot's letters from 1842 reveal heartfelt interactions with Cara Bray, to whom she went for comfort when her family disowned her; with Sara Hennell, who supported her when she eloped with George Lewes; and also with Barbara Bodichon, who was a source of strength for Eliot after Lewes' death. Eliot's union with Lewes amounted to withdrawal from Victorian society, and she understood the repercussions of her decision: "the most painful consequence will, I know, be the loss of friends" (*Letters* 2:179). Women were infrequent visitors to the Lewes home. Charles Norton said in 1869: "She is not received in general society, and the women who visit her are either so èmancipèe as not to mind what the world says about them, or have no social position to maintain. Lewes dines out a good deal, and some of the men with whom he dines go without their wives to his house on Sundays" (5:7).<sup>153</sup> Eliot's female friendships were limited to those willing to risk their own reputation by associating with her, and she depended on those friends for support.

After her move from Griff to Foleshill in 1842, Eliot developed friendships with Cara Bray and Sara Hennell, freethinkers who could sympathize with her shifting religious views and introduce her to others who also questioned the truth of Christianity. Her friendship with Hennell and Bray would provide strength to her for many years. In 1852, she wrote to Hennell to express gratitude for her friendship and acceptance:

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<sup>152</sup> Correspondence between Lewis and Eliot had ended by 1849, and when Eliot requested her letters back, Lewis complied with hurt feelings. In 1874, Eliot found her former friend's address and initiated contact with a gift of ten pounds. Lewis responded happily, and Eliot continued to send money with a letter once a year for the rest of her life. Lewis later told John Cross that she had known Eliot more intimately than any other (Harris, *Oxford Reader's Companion* 212).

<sup>153</sup> Pauline Nestor points out that Lewes was not only the cause of her isolation but also the manager of it. They had no overnight visitors because he said it would interfere with his work, he objected to her attending public events without him, and he censored her mail to keep negative criticism from her. Eliot accepted his protection without complaint (143). She claimed to enjoy what she called her "excommunication" (*Letters* 3:367) because she detested social obligations.



[Your conduct] has been so generous and sympathetic, that if I did not heartily love you I should feel deep gratitude—but love excluded gratitude. It would be a sad day indeed for me in which I was “alienated” from you, for I should never replace you. It is impossible that I should ever love two women better than I love you and Cara—indeed it seems to me that I can never love any so well, and it is certain that I can never have any friend—not even a husband—who would supply the loss of those associations with the past which belong to you. (2:19)

When Hennell expressed disappointment for not being told of Eliot’s elopement, Eliot reassured her of her devotion to their friendship:

When you say that I do not care about Cara’s or your opinion and friendship it seems much the same to me as if you said that I didn’t care to eat when I was hungry or to drink when I was thirsty. One of two things: either I am a creature without affection, on whom the memories of years have no hold, or, you, Cara and Mr. Bray are the most cherished friends I have in the world. (2:181)

In the same letter, she said: “Cara, you and my own sister are the three women who are tied to my heart by a cord which can never be broken and which really pulls me continually” (2:182).

In addition to Bray and Hennell, Barbara Bodichon proved a faithful friend to Eliot. The two women met through Bessie Parkes and formed a sympathetic friendship based on mutual understanding. Bodichon was the first to discover that Eliot (who had hidden her identity) was the author of *Adam Bede*:

My darling Marian! Forgive me for being so very affectionate but I am so intensely delighted at your success. . . . I saw the 1<sup>st</sup> review and read one long extract

which...instantly made me internally exclaim that is written by Marian Evans, there is her great big head and heart and her wise wide views. . . . 1<sup>st</sup>. That a woman should write a wise and humourous book which should take a place by Thackeray. 2<sup>nd</sup>. That YOU *that you* whom they spit at should do it! (3:56)

Eliot thanked Bodichon for her “love and sympathy,” explaining that she was “the first friend who has given any symptom of knowing me—the first heart that has recognized me in a book which has come from my heart of hearts” (3:63). Bodichon encouraged Eliot’s writing and was one of the few women with whom Eliot discussed her work. Illegitimate daughter of a radical politician, Bodichon could relate to living outside the bounds of societal propriety. She took trips with Eliot and Lewes, visited their home regularly, and gave advice on domestic matters. She was the first person to whom Eliot wrote after the death of Lewes and one of the few who knew of her impending marriage to John Cross (Nestor 150-51). Eliot’s female community offered sympathy throughout the painful experience of social alienation.

Eliot had a need to feel sympathy from others, and the intimate friendships she formed with a few women throughout her life provided support during times of difficulty. Eliot understood through her female friends the necessity of community for the exercise of sympathy and the power of community to restore those who suffer to wholeness through tender interaction.

#### SYMPATHY AND FEMALE COMMUNITY IN *ARMGART*

The theme of community appears throughout Eliot’s poems (and fiction), and the theme of female community in particular plays out in *Armgart*, a dramatic poem about the struggle of the woman artist who finds fulfillment in female friendship after suffering a great

loss.<sup>154</sup> The poem strikingly recapitulates Eliot's ambivalence toward women's roles in society, her own role as a woman artist, and her maternal feelings.<sup>155</sup> *Armgar* critics examine in particular *Armgar*'s lost voice (to discuss the silencing of women), her wasted female potential (to comment on women's limited choices in Victorian society), and her professional success (to remark on women's negotiation of the private and public spheres). Because these themes have been aptly discussed, I focus instead on the poem's expression of the redemptive power of sympathy and female community.

*Armgar* features a famous opera singer who must retire after losing her voice.<sup>156</sup> Eliot appropriately chose the verse drama form to portray the spiritual transformation of an opera singer, a dramatic performer whose own drama takes place off stage. The first scene of the drama opens with two pillars bearing the bronze busts of Gluck and Beethoven. *Armgar* is performing in Christoph von Gluck's opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1762) at the beginning of the drama, and she loses the chance to perform in Ludwig van Beethoven's *Fidelio* (1805) at the end. Margaret Reynolds points out that *Orpheus* and *Fidelio* are cross-dressing roles in different senses; *Orpheus* is a male and *Fidelio* is a woman dressing as a man (*Oxford Reader's Companion* 307).<sup>157</sup> The dramatic form of the poem and the cross-dressing

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<sup>154</sup> Eliot sold *Armgar* to *Macmillan's Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1871. In *Macmillan's*, it was titled "Armgar: A Tragic Poem." (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:91). The tragedy refers to *Armgar*'s descent from fame to the ordinary women's lot in nineteenth-century society. It is interesting to consider Eliot's choice of the dramatic form given her earlier evangelical distaste for theater.

<sup>155</sup> A number of critics believe that *Armgar* is Eliot's most autobiographical poem. On the whole, she avoided autobiographical topics in her poetry. She did not address the issue of the fallen woman and dealt with marriage subversively in "How Lisa Loved the King." The only poems with identifiable autobiographical elements are *Armgar*, which deals with the female artist and her struggle with fame and public display, and "Brother and Sister" which concerns sibling relationships and gender roles.

<sup>156</sup> For Eliot, music was the art that expressed emotional life. A number of her poems prominently feature the role of music: "O May I Join," "The Legend of Jubal," *Armgar*, "Arion," "Stradivarius," "Erinna," and *The Spanish Gypsy*.

<sup>157</sup> Grace Kehler relates the historical significance of the role of Orpheus:

performances provide the backdrop for a story of spiritual transformation involving masking and unmasking and multiple layers of drama. Armgart masquerades as a man for her part in the opera, and she perceives that she is a medium (a mask, in a sense) for Gluck to sing through. She says that Gluck “sang, not listened: every linked note / Was his immortal pulse that stirred in mine” (*Poems* 118). In addition to the masquerading, multiple layers of dramatic scenes take place in the opening of the poem. Listening to Armgart and her voice instructor, Leo, reenact the performance, Graf, Armgart’s suitor, refers to a “double drama”: the drama of her operatic performance and the drama of the audience’s response to her performance. Her theatrical disagreement with Leo over a trill provides another performance for an audience of two: Graf and Walpurga. Eliot’s use of masking and dramatic layering at the poem’s introduction prepares the reader for a dramatic story of unmasking and revelation while reminding the reader that we too are the audience for the poetess’s dramatic narrative.<sup>158</sup> The reader may recall that the feminine poetess once masked herself as a man with a male pseudonym. Though she now appears unmasked with her feminine identity known, her self-posturing as a poetess hints at another sort of masking—one that is benevolent and feminine.

Initially, Armgart’s blinding egocentrism renders her spiritually bereft as she views

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Armgart, though she idealizes her feminine voice as superior to “tenor or baritone,” literally assumes a role first performed by castrati, the role of Orpheus. . . . According to legend, his most affecting songs follow the death of his wife, symbolically attaching song to trauma and loss. And of the many castrati and prima donnas who aspired to the more positive Orphic role in culture – that is, the role of the acknowledged, celebrated artist – but a handful garnered acclaim while the rest battled insignificance or deprecation during their lives. Armgart’s history, too, remains a blank, not just because the drama ends so abruptly, but also because Armgart has not established herself as a full-fledged prima donna. She may be “the queen of song” in terms of her debut . . . but audiences are changeable and forgetful, notably when celebrity is short-lived. (160)

<sup>158</sup> Patrick Brantlinger explains that dramatic form underscores the power of the performing woman in *Armgart* while her novels feature women who are thwarted in their attempts to participate in the public sphere (213).

herself worthy of worship. Graf claims to be her “votary,” and Leo is “her priest” (124). She envisions her influence as extending far and wide:

Shall I turn aside  
 From splendours which flash out the glow I make,  
 And live to make, in all the chosen breasts  
 Of half a Continent? No, may it come,  
 That splendour! May the day be near when men  
 Think much to let my horses draw me home,  
 And new lands welcome me upon their beach,  
 Loving me for my fame. That is the truth  
 Of what I wish, nay, yearn for. Shall I lie?  
 Pretend to seek obscurity — to sing  
 In hope of disregard? A vile pretence!  
 And blasphemy besides. For what is fame  
 But the benignant strength of One, transformed  
 To joy of Many? Tributes, plaudits come  
 As necessary breathing of such joy;  
 And may they come to me! (123-24)

She seeks worship from her audience and from “new lands” and sings for accolades, not to uplift others. Obscurity is an intolerable, blasphemous thought. Armgart’s grandiosity and self-focus render her unable to care about others. Her audience, Graf, Leo, and Walpurga, her cousin and attendant, worship her, but in return she extends no sympathy to them. She cares only about how others can serve her. When Graf asks Armgart to give up her ambition (a

blasphemous suggestion) and concentrate her power “in home delights / Which penetrate and purify the world” (129), she replies indignantly:

What! leave the opera with my part ill-sung  
 While I was warbling in a drawing-room?  
 Sing in the chimney-corner to inspire  
 My husband reading news? Let the world hear  
 My music only in his morning speech  
 Less stammering than most honourable men's?  
 No! ... The great masters write  
 For women's voices, and great Music wants me!  
 I need not crush myself within a mould  
 Of theory called Nature: I have room  
 To breathe and grow unstunted. (129-30)

Armgarth prefers to wear the mask of a performer and receive worship rather than engage in intimate relationships as a wife, friend, or mother. She refuses the “renunciation” associated with domestic life and claims that her voice is her child (128), that she can “live unmated, but not live / Without the bliss of singing to the world, / And feeling all my world respond to me” (134). She prefers a life of self-interest rather than one involving sacrifice and giving: “No; I will live alone and pour my pain / With passion into music, where it turns / To what is best within my better self” (132).

However, when she loses her voice and livelihood, Armgarth finds herself sharing the

plight of the ordinary nineteenth-century unmarried woman.<sup>159</sup> Having cast away her chance to marry in favor of fame and worship, she becomes redundant and purposeless, “[t]he millionth woman in superfluous herds” (137) “[w]ithout a purpose, abject as the rest / To bear the yoke of life” (138-39). She morosely embraces her new lot that she calls ‘The Woman’s Lot: a Tale of Everyday:’ / A middling woman’s, to impress the world / With high superfluosness” (143). This fall from fame to mediocrity forces Armgart to reflect on her self-devotion, and it is Walpurga who guides her to reflection by urging her toward a life of fellow-feeling. Throughout the first scenes, the audience has seen Walpurga arranging flowers, setting out an “offering” of food for Armgart, and providing emotional support (119). She is the domestic, feminine ideal, and when Armgart undergoes a crisis, she becomes her spiritual guide. She encourages Armgart to turn to a life of compassion by suggesting a reciprocation of sympathy. She says to Armgart: “you must see a future in your reach / With happiness enough to make a dower / For two of modest claims” (139), but Armgart rejects Walpurga as she rejected Graf: “Oh, you intone / That chant of consolation wherewith ease / Makes itself easier in the sight of pain” (139). Armgart associates intimacy (of marriage or friendship) with mediocrity and living as a wife, mother, and friend (rather than as an idol) as petty and meaningless. She perceives the average woman’s life as

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<sup>159</sup> Grace Kehler explains that without an operatic career and without a family, Armgart has no secure position in society:

She had envisioned opera as an alternative to domestic feminine roles, as she indicates in her metaphoric placement of herself inside an operatic family: once the “bride” of art and “mother” of the child-voice. . . . Armgart as a prima donna acquired cultural merit that exempted her from the usual productive-reproductive gender binary, enabling her instead to nurture her talent. The metaphor of family, however, underscores the fragility of both nuclear and operatic structures of relationship, for like the domestic woman Armgart finds herself in a classic nineteenth-century dilemma: she has lost her only child (voice) and been deserted by her faithless husband (art/its audience), who has already found love elsewhere. (161)

The mother grieving the loss of a child is a familiar poetess theme.

miserable and requiring a mask of happiness: “All the world now is but a rack of threads / To twist and dwarf me into pettiness / And basely feigned content, the placid mask / Of woman's misery (145). Walpurga points out that Armgart’s seeing the placid masks of women shows her inability to understand the feelings of other women:

Ay, such a mask  
 As the few born like you to easy joy,  
 Cradled in privilege, take for natural  
 On all the lowly faces that must look  
 Upward to you! What revelation now  
 Shows you the mask or gives presentiment  
 Of sadness hidden? (145)

Armgart has been unable to see beyond masks because she does not want the burden of recognizing the suffering of others. Patrick Brantlinger states that Walpurga points out that “everyday performances of unexceptional women, including herself, went unnoticed by Armgart until she lost her talent,” and that Walpurga “prefers her own concealed misery to Armgart’s inability to see beyond masks and sympathize with the thousands of individuals who were her audience” (214).<sup>160</sup> Walpurga complains that Armgart has never noticed her suffering though she has been attending to her daily:

You who every day  
 These five years saw me limp to wait on you,  
 And thought the order perfect which gave *me*,

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<sup>160</sup> Brantlinger also connects Armgart to the Alcharisi in *Daniel Deronda* who, isolated and alone, also is unable to understand her audience (214).



The girl without pretention to be aught

.....

To watch the night through when her brain was fired

With too much gladness—listen, always listen

To what *she* felt, who having power had right

To feel exorbitantly, and submerge

The soul around her with the poured-out flood

Of what must be ere she were satisfied!

. . . Why not love,

Love nurtured even with that strength of self

Which found no room save in another's life. (145)

Consumed with her own life of fame and then with her miserable lot as an unmarried, redundant woman, Armgart has never noticed Walpurga's worse lot as an unmarried woman who is also lame. She has never recognized that Walpurga has been serving, sympathizing with, and adoring her for many years without receiving any support or understanding in return. Walpurga speaks against the nature of one who "who can live / In mere mock knowledge of their fellows' woe" (146) and disabuses Armgart of the notion that she and her audience were in sympathy with one another. She scolds Armgart for her lack of fellow-feeling for others and for assuming a "rebel's right" as heavenly royalty not to join the lot of humanity (146):

Are you no longer chartered, privileged,

But sunk to simple woman's penury,

To ruthless Nature's chary average—

Where is the rebel's right for you alone?  
 Noble rebellion lifts a common load;  
 But what is he who flings his own load off  
 And leaves his fellows toiling? Rebel's right?  
 Say rather, the deserter's. Oh, you smiled  
 From your clear height on all the million lots  
 Which yet you brand as abject. (146)

Walpurga tells Armgart “a lame girl’s truth,” that Armgart does not “bear a human heart” and cannot sympathize with humanity because she thinks herself too superior:

For what is it to you that women, men,  
 Plod, faint, are weary, and espouse despair  
 Of aught but fellowship? Save that you spurn  
 To be among them? Now, then, you are lame—  
 Maimed, as you said, and leveled with the crowd:  
 Call it new birth—birth from that monstrous Self  
 Which, smiling down upon a race oppressed,  
 Say, ‘All is good, for I am throned at ease.’ (148)

Armgart’s “lameness,” which unmask her by taking her from the position of a distanced, idolized performer to the level of the rest of society, allows the chance for a “new birth.” She accepts Walpurga’s rebuke and for the first time understands her own lack of sympathy: “Yet you speak truth; / I wearied you, it seems; took all your help / As cushioned nobles use a weary serf, / Not looking at his face” (146). Sorrow allows the once blind Armgart to see the suffering of others:

I was blind  
 With too much happiness; true vision comes  
 Only, it seems, with sorrow. Were there one  
 This moment near me, suffering what I feel,  
 And needing me for comfort in her pang —  
 Then it were worth the while to live; not else. (146-47)

Armgarth's enlightenment prompts her to try to understand the feelings of others. Practicing fellow-feeling for the first time, she asks Leo how old he is and remarks: "Strange! since I have known you / Till now I never wondered how you lived" (148). Armgarth shows concern for Leo and learns that his heart is "half broken" because of his failure as a composer. Her recognition of and identification with his sorrow is a sign of growing redemption.

With Walpurga as her spiritual guide, she drops the mask of the distanced performer and joins humanity as "a broken thing" who is better able to feel the suffering of others. Mathilde Blind explains that Eliot creates in Armgarth a woman with high artistic aims and ambition and then implies that what is valuable about her is "the part of her nature which she shares with ordinary humanity" (230). For Eliot, the multitude "claims the deepest sympathy and tenderest compassion; so that all greatness, in her eyes, is not a privilege, but a debt, which entails on its possessor a more strenuous effort, a completer devotion to the service of average humanity" (231). Armgarth says to Leo: "We must bury our dead joys / And live above them with a living world" (151). She decides to make a humble living as a music teacher to care for herself and her cousin and use her gift to uplift others rather than herself:

I would take humble work and do it well —  
 Teach music, singing — what I can — not here,

But in some smaller town where I may bring  
 The method you have taught me, pass your gift  
 To others who can use it for delight.  
 You think I can do that? (150)

Rob Breton asserts that the poem reveals Eliot's discomfort with the idea of the female spectacle: "That Armgart chooses teaching over acting suggests that Eliot subscribed to the conventionally Victorian idea that acting is morally questionable, generating a kind of reckless voyeurism. Singing is less objectionable because it is not simply a performance but rather an utterance of genuine emotion" (120). Breton may have a point here, but I think Eliot's choice of music for Armgart's post-opera professions speaks more to Armgart's desire to exercise her gift in a way that will allow her to connect with humanity rather than place herself again in a distancing performer's role. Furthermore, Armgart's choice to live in Freiburg, Walpurga's small hometown, is a sacrificial gift to repay Walpurga's loyalty. Walpurga sacrificed her life for Armgart by moving away from home to attend to Armgart throughout her career, and now Armgart will sacrifice her life by returning to Walpurga's hometown and caring for her. Armgart buries her "dead joy" as a mother buries her dead child: "Mothers do so, bereaved; then learn to love / Another's living child" (151). Armgart, having lost her own child (her voice) will adopt "another's living child" (151). The adopted child may refer to the voice students she plans to instruct or the community in general that she plans to serve. She admits that "it is hard / To take the little corpse, and lay it low, / And say, 'None misses it but me'" (151), but she renounces her fame and her operatic role, saying: "Paulina sings Fidelio, / And they will welcome her to-night" (151). Armgart has learned fellow-feeling through suffering and guidance and finds solace in sympathetic female

community. She will embrace the role of sacrificial mother who will serve and sympathize with others.

Eliot conveys a message about the importance of female community in *Armgarth* to promote the value of sympathy. Brantlinger explains that “Eliot’s elision of the literary character with which *Armgarth* identifies and the author who writes about that character underscores how the performing woman serves as a figure for the female writer” (213).<sup>161</sup> Like the performers in her dramatic poem, Eliot performed her role of poetess to guide readers to spiritual truth through a dramatic rendering of a story involving masking and unmasking, loss and gain, spiritual death and rebirth.

#### ELIOT AND MOTHERHOOD

Eliot was interested in motherhood as a poetic theme and as a construct for her own image. Her direct experience with maternal relations inspired a powerful albeit metaphoric image of motherhood as the embodiment of sacrifice and nurture throughout her poetry. As she aged, Eliot embraced growing maternal feelings despite not having children of her own. She was close to Lewes’s children, who affectionately referred to her as “Mutter,” and she

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<sup>161</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer discusses *Armgarth* in terms of Eliot’s anxiety about authorship; however, she remarks that Eliot refused to make a direct association between her life and her career. John Cross, she explains, quotes Eliot’s reply to his suggestion to write an autobiography: “The only thing I should care much to dwell on would be the absolute despair I suffered from of ever being able to achieve anything. No one could ever have felt a greater despair, and a knowledge of this might be a help to some other struggler . . . but, on the other hand, it might only lead to an increase of bad writing” (Cross 1:29). Bodenheimer asserts that the response reveals elements of ambition and self-aggrandizement. She states: “The justification of her writing as an art that fulfilled a need in others comes into play for a moment, raised only to be quenched by the old prohibitive fear, turned against the fledgling ambitions of others. George Eliot was ready to teach others to suffer, but not to aspire” (31). I believe Bodenheimer overlooks the redemptive aspect of the poem. It is true that suffering and resignation play a role in this poem. Eliot reveals the limitations that women, especially unmarried women, faced in nineteenth-century society. However, the conclusion is not entirely negative. *Armgarth* finds refuge in female society, she becomes more human by learning the value of sympathy, and she will redirect her ambition and talent to help others.

formed motherly attachments with younger people. To Oscar Browning she explained (1869): “I find the growth of a maternal feeling towards both men and women who are much younger than myself” (*Letters* 5:5), and to Emilia Pattison she stated: “in proportion as I profoundly rejoice that I never brought a child into the world, I am conscious of having an unused stock of motherly tenderness, which sometimes overflows” (5:52).

She acted as spiritual mother to younger women whom she mentored.<sup>162</sup> Though these women worshiped Eliot as an idol rather than treated her as a friend, they provided her comfort in later years after a life marked by loneliness and social alienation.<sup>163</sup> Elaine Showalter explains: “By the time people came to sit at her feet, Eliot’s personality had been molded by caution, by suffering, by the social isolation caused by the union with Lewes” (“Greening” 297). Society had rejected her, her brother Isaac had not spoken to her throughout the years she lived with Lewes, and her parents had passed away.<sup>164</sup> Eliot created her own societal and family ties in later life by expressing motherly tenderness to others.

Outsiders observed Eliot’s maternal nature. John Fiske wrote to his wife after a visit to the Lewes’s in 1873 that Eliot

looks simple, frank, cordial, and matronly, and seems ever so proud of Lewes, and ever so fond of him. I call her a good, honest, genuine, motherly woman with no nonsense about her. . . . I never saw such a woman. There is nothing a bit masculine

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<sup>162</sup> For example, she signed letters to Elma Stuart “Your loving Mother (in the spirit)” (*Letters* 6:378).

<sup>163</sup> Pauline Nestor explains: “Rather than close literary friendships, the most marked legacy of Eliot’s celebrity was the host of admiring disciples such as Edith Simcox, Elma Stuart, and Maria Congreve, who gathered around her in later life. They did not, however, offer Eliot any real opportunity for communality in the sense of the mutual exchange. . . .” (156). Elaine Showalter says that Eliot had “an eager cult of female disciples who cast her in the role of ‘spiritual mother’ and adored her as someone superior, majestic, melancholy, and remote” (“Greening” 293).

<sup>164</sup> Eliot thought of her literary works as surrogate children. She referred to *The Mill on the Floss* as her youngest child (*Letters* 3:335).

about her; she is thoroughly feminine and looks and acts as if she were made for nothing but to mother babies. But she has a power of stating an argument equal to any man; equal to any man do I say? I have never seen any man, except Herbert Spencer, who could state a case equal to her. . . . Remember that . . . George Eliot [is] just the age of my mother—a queer coincidence. (*Letters* 5:464)

Eliot observed and appreciated the maternal in others as well. When in Rome with Lewes in 1860, she wrote to Mrs. Richard Congreve:

Oh, the beautiful men and women and children here! Such wonderful babies with wise eyes!—such grand-featured mothers nursing them! As one drives along the streets sometimes, one sees a Madonna and child at every third or fourth upper window; and on Monday a little crippled girl seated at the door of a church looked up at us with a face full of such pathetic sweetness and beauty, that I think it can hardly leave me again. (3:288)

Eliot's experience with and feelings about motherhood influenced her poetic approach. For her, and for the poetess in general, motherhood was a powerful symbol of self-resignation, duty, and spiritual nurturing. The poetess at once represented and promoted these attributes. By including maternal images in her poetry, Eliot reminded readers of her role as mother-poet while at the same time promoting motherly values such as sacrifice and sympathy. Kate Flint explains that the figure of mother features so prominently in Eliot's writing

partly because of the emotional resonance that it held for her, and partly because it provides an ideal site on which to examine the nexus of ideas concerning the social and the natural that lie at the heart of her treatment of gender. She invested the role of motherhood with sacredness, representing the highest form of duty of which most

women were capable. (165)

Motherhood, for Eliot, represented sympathetic care for others. She wrote to Maria Lewis: “Maternal love [is] the only purely unselfish feeling that exists on this earth; the only affection which (as far as it appears) flows from the loving to the beloved object in one continual stream” (*Letters* 1:23). Flint notes that in this passage Eliot’s notion of motherhood “appears as the purest form of George Eliot’s often-commended virtue of sympathy” (167). She explains that “Maternal feeling...although it may encompass George Eliot’s most cherished social values—sympathetic involvement, recognition of the demands of alterity, patient adherence to duty—is not a freestanding attribute, but must always be seen in its intersections with broader social relations and pressures” (168).<sup>165</sup> Eliot recognized the importance that society gave to motherhood, and she played upon this collective understanding of the sacred role of motherhood in her works to promote sympathetic understanding.

Abundant images of motherhood in her poetry reveal a writer who came to see herself as mother to her readers, whom she guided in matters of morality. Although she did not believe women were morally superior to men, she took advantage of the perception of the English woman as spiritual guide and mother of the nation to impart moral lessons. Images of Mother Earth breast-feeding and child-rearing remind readers of the authority of the mother-poet. Most critics who discuss her portrayal of motherhood focus on her novels, investigating

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<sup>165</sup> Flint qualifies this statement with an example from *Felix Holt*. Eliot explores the idea of the unrequited love of a mother (Mrs. Transome) for her son (Harold) within a larger theme of women acquiescing to male power (168).



the figurative Madonnas or the fictional mothers who reject or abandon their children.<sup>166</sup> Few comment on the image of mother that appears throughout her poetry. Eliot does not present many portraits of actual mothers in her poetry (exceptions include brief mentions in *The Spanish Gypsy*, “Brother and Sister,” and “The Legend of Jubal”).<sup>167</sup> Mothers as characters reside in the background of her poems as silent, rather passive figures. More often, Eliot uses motherhood metaphorically to convey the idea of mother as a strong, sacrificial leader who cares for and guides her children towards independence, productivity, and wisdom.

In several poems, Eliot relies on the image of Mother Earth to create such a picture. In “Agatha” Mother Earth is young, fertile, and nurturing. She “spreads soft and rounded breasts / To feed her children” (*Poems* 51).<sup>168</sup> Youthful Mother Earth enjoys the early stages of motherhood when her children are happy, dependent, and innocent. The poem “In the South” features earth as an older mother who has reared and sent off her children into the world: “O gentle brightness of late autumn morns! / The dear Earth like a patient matron left / By all she loved and reared, still smiles and loves” (47). Mother Earth is mature, patient, and loving. Her children have left her alone, but she finds contentment in her solitude,

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<sup>166</sup> Critics often discuss Dinah, Dorothea, Mirah, and Romola as Madonna figures and Hetty, Molly Farren (Eppie’s mother), and Contessa Alcharisi as unnatural mothers who in various ways abandon their children.

<sup>167</sup> In *The Spanish Gypsy*, mothers are briefly mentioned but do not figure as characters (*Poems* 213, 214, 225, 239, 298, 361, 427). The female narrator (sister) of “Brother and Sister” recollects her mother as doting on the brother and clinging while letting them go on their journey: “Our mother bade us keep the trodden ways, / Stroked down my tippet, set my brother’s frill, / Then with the benediction of her gaze / Clung to us lessening, and pursued us still” (85). The narrator of “The Legend of Jubal” describes the “broad-bosomed mother of the strong” (102). Presumably Cain’s wife, she sits next to her husband surrounded by her children, looking “Like Demeter, placid o’er the throng” (102). She is mentioned just seven lines after Mother Earth, and both mothers (the figurative Mother Earth and the actual mother of Cain’s children) are described as fertile, peaceful, and harmonious.

<sup>168</sup> *The Spanish Gypsy* (written around the same time as “Agatha”) offers a similar introduction in which Spain is described in motherly terms: “Broad-breasted Spain, leaning with equal love / On the Mid sea... / And on the untraveled Ocean’s restless tides” (203). In both poems, Eliot equates motherhood with land and with a sense of home.

knowing that she has done her duty. The poem describes her as creator of all life around. She is productive and prophetic. “Scattered villages” are her children who have left her but still “sleep / In happy morning dreams” (47). Mother Earth smiles though she suffers the loss of her children who have moved on to independence. In “The Legend of Jubal,” Eliot conveys a sense of loss by depicting a mother with a dead child. In a world in which “Death was now lord of Life” and suffering abounds, “a mother fair / Who folding to her breast a dying child / Beams with feigned joy that but makes sadness mild” (93). Eliot presents the grieving mother to show that it is a mother’s duty to bear pain and loss with strength and self-resignation. Hughes points out the tendency of Victorian poets to filter loss through domestic imagery: “Victorians of all ages died at home and were usually prepared for burial there as well. The convergence of domestic ideals and the common domestic experience of death intensified society’s focus on mourning and the need to articulate emotional response” (168). Motherhood could provide a powerful symbol of loss and mourning as well as nurture and new life. The reader encounters motherhood in poetry with a readiness to feel and express emotion.

In “Jubal,” Mother Earth features prominently to represent community and harmony: “Earth and her children were at festival, / Glowing as with one heart and one consent-- / Thought, love, trees, rocks, in sweet warm radiance blent” (102), and she fosters those traits as she guides Jubal throughout his journey. She provides sustenance, company, and counsel on his pilgrimage Eastward to “some far-off land” (105). When he arrives at the land of Seth’s descendents, Jubal acknowledges Mother Earth’s provision:

Here have I found my thirsty soul’s desire,  
Eastward the hills touch heaven, and evening’s fire

Flames through deep waters; I will take my rest,  
 And feed anew from my great mother's breast,  
 The sky-clasped Earth, whose voices nurture me  
 As the flowers' sweetness doth the honey-bee. (106)

Mother Earth nurtures and provides rest for the wanderer and creates a home for him everywhere he goes. When after many years he returns to his origin of birth to complete his journey, he longs for his tribe to remember and "run to greet me, welcoming" (107), but his tribe does not recognize him. When he claims to be Jubal, immortal creator of the music that binds the community, they mock him, accuse him of blasphemy, beat him with their flutes, and leave him for dead (111-12). Mother Earth alone, ever at his side, celebrates his return:

the dear Earth, with mother's constancy,  
 Met and embraced him, and said, "Thou art he!  
 This was thy cradle, here my breast was thine,  
 Where feeding, thou didst all thy life entwine  
 With my sky-wedded life in heritage divine" (108)

Despite the rejection of his community, Jubal receives nurture and welcome from constant Mother Earth who helps him complete his spiritual journey and reminds him of his divine oneness with the earth.<sup>169</sup>

Throughout her poetry, Eliot creates a picture of Mother Earth who raises and sends

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<sup>169</sup> In the poem, the three sons of Cain are "heroes of their race," each seeking immortality through different means (95). Tubal-Cain creates industry, and Jubal creates art and music. Jabal is the mother figure who nurtures children, keeps family together, and spends time with the girls in the family (95-6). The three brothers represent three aspects of civilized society: home, industry, and art. Jabal appears to be a man but really is the embodiment of nineteenth-century standards of femininity. He is shepherd and spiritual leader of the nation.

off her children and who guides and provides for those under her watch. At times she nurtures and fosters community. At other times, she serves as a substitute for community. Sometimes she suffers, but she does not complain. She is constant, productive, and prophetic. She is home. Like the mother-poet herself, Mother Earth is the readers' spiritual guide. Although Eliot did not subscribe to the idea of spiritual superiority by nature of gender alone, she did view mothers as spiritual, sacrificial leaders and demonstrators of sympathy, and she viewed her role beyond that of a writer, as that of a guide to her readers in matters of sympathetic understanding and community bonding.

#### SYMPATHY AND MOTHERHOOD IN "AGATHA"

Like *Armgart*, "Agatha" involves the theme of female community. Both poems were published in the same year (1869), both present the main characters' names as titles, both are located in a foreign land (Germany),<sup>170</sup> and both feature women who, while not biological

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<sup>170</sup> Eliot locates *Armgart* in Charlottenburg on the edges of Berlin, a city with a vibrant social and intellectual life, and the action will move to Freiberg, a quieter town in southern Germany, at the poem's conclusion. "Agatha" is set in Sankt Märgen, Germany, a village 25 kilometers northeast of Freiberg. Sankt Märgen made an impression on Eliot. She described the place to John Blackwood during her visit in 1868:

We got your letter yesterday here among the peaceful mountain tops. After ascending gradually (in a carriage) for nearly four hours, we found ourselves in a region of grass, corn, and pine woods, so beautifully varied that we seem to be walking in a great park laid out for our special delight. The monks as usual found out the friendly solitude, and this place of St. Märgen was originally nothing but an Augustinian monastery. About three miles off is another place of like origin, called St. Peter's, formerly a Benedictine monastery, and still used as a place of preparation for the Catholic priesthood. The Monks have all vanished, but the people are devout Catholics. At every half mile by the roadside is a carefully kept crucifix, and last night as we were having our supper in the common room of the inn we suddenly heard sounds that seemed to me like those of an accordion. "Is that a zittern?" said Mr. Lewes to the German lady by his side. "No, it is prayer." The servants, by themselves—the host and hostess were in the same room with us—were saying their evening prayers, men's and women's voices blending in unusually correct harmony. The same loud prayer is heard at morning noon and evening from the shepherds and workers in the fields. We suppose that the believers in Mr. Home and in Madame Rachel would pronounce these people "grossly superstitious." The land is cultivated by rich peasant proprietors, and the people here as in Petersthal look healthy and contented. This really adds to one's pleasure in seeing natural beauties. (*Letters* 4:457)

mothers, are types of mothers to a community.<sup>171</sup> Both women create a home with other supportive females for whom they care, and both garner strength within those female communities to serve the larger community. Eliot uses the dramatic verse form for both *Armgar* and “Agatha;” however, the action in *Armgar* is immediate, and the reader assumes, at the end of the poem, the development of a female community not yet in existence. The action in “Agatha,” on the other hand, occurs in the past. The story about female community has already taken place; the narrator recounts the story of women who are dead but remembered by the community. *Armgar*’s story is that of an egocentric person who

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<sup>171</sup> Critics who discuss motherhood in Eliot’s poetry focus primarily on Fedalma as Madonna figure in *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868), an epic narrative drama. I examine “Agatha” instead since it is a critically underrepresented poem. Nonetheless, a few words on *The Spanish Gypsy* are in order. In her notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot explains the inspiration for the poem:

The subject of “The Spanish Gypsy” was originally suggested to me by a picture which hangs in the Scuola di’ San Rocco at Venice, over the door of the large Sala containing Tintoretto’s frescoes. It is an Annunciation, said to be by Titian. . . . It occurred to me that here was a great dramatic motive of the same class as those used by the Greek dramatists, yet specifically differing from them. A young maiden, believing herself to be on the eve of the chief event of her life—marriage—about to share in the ordinary lot of womanhood, full of young hope, has suddenly announced to her that she is chosen to fulfill a great destiny, entailing a terribly different experience from that of ordinary womanhood. She is chosen, not by any arbitrariness, but as a result of foregoing hereditary conditions: she obeys. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord.” Here, I thought, is a subject grander than that of Iphigenia, and it has never been used. (Cross 3: 30-31)

Eliot goes on to say that to “give the motive a clothing” she chose the struggle of the gypsies against the Moors in Spain. Under these conditions she could create a heroine with hereditary claim among the gypsies which would serve as a “symbol of the part which is played in the general human lot by hereditary conditions in the largest sense, and of the fact that what we call duty is entirely made up of such conditions” (31). The Annunciation played an inspiring role in the creation of a poem in which the heroine is depicted as mother to her nation:

...her cries  
 Deep smothering in her breast, as one who guides  
 Her children through the wilds, and sees and knows  
 Of danger more than they, and feels more pangs,  
 Yet shrinks not, groans not, bearing in her heart  
 Their ignorant misery and their trust in her.

.....  
 The black-haired mother steps  
 Athwart the boat’s edge, and with opened arms,  
 A wandering Isis outcast from the gods. (*Poems* 439-40)

Fedalma is not explicitly linked with the Holy Mother as Agatha is. However, both heroines are equated with motherhood despite being childless, and both are the sole spiritual leaders of their communities. Eliot, also childless, presents herself as spiritual mother to the nation in the creation of these poems and in her role as poetess.

learns through hardship to practice sympathy. The poem concludes with her enlightenment, and a new life will begin as the poem ends. Agatha's story is an example of a life sympathetically lived. A discussion of "Agatha," focusing on setting and character, will show how Eliot appealed to poetess themes of home, female community, and motherhood to relay a sympathetic message to her readers.

A discussion of setting in women's poetry is necessary to an understanding of Eliot's treatment of home in "Agatha." Eliot provides a detailed description of the setting of "Agatha" in the hills of Germany to create a sense of home in a foreign land. She set a number of her poems in foreign places and often allowed her main characters to travel as they sought spiritual transformation. Armstrong explains that women's poetry was associated with an "impassioned land" or emotional space that lay beyond the definitions and rules of the nationality and culture of the poet. She states: "movement across and between cultural boundaries, with its emphasis on travel, could be seen as a search for the exotic, an escape from restrictions into the 'other' of bourgeois society" (*Victorian Poetry* 325). West-Burnham argues that the concept of traveling for women's poetry is important because it allows for personal and spiritual transformation as well as an understanding of a wider social context ("Travelling" 91). Women writers, she explains, change their landscapes from the domestic sphere and stereotypes of femininity of the nineteenth-century woman to unfamiliar territory (a different country and cultural context).<sup>172</sup> The motif of the traveler allowed

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<sup>172</sup> Eliot's *The Spanish Gypsy*, for example, moves to fifteenth-century Spain allowing Eliot to ask questions about gender, race, religion, and class in a "safer" space while still maintaining propriety (West-Burnham 91-92). West-Burnham states:

In the abandonment of the personal life, George Eliot depicts a heroine who foregoes a life of personal happiness and love in favour of "mothering" her tribe and working for the greater good of others. Eliot thus begins to ascribe to many of the social and political challenges taking place in the nineteenth

women to transgress and challenge perceived versions of self, life, and work of the women writer (92).<sup>173</sup> Leighton discusses Hemans's relocating poems of motherhood to her own mother's Italian-German lands, explaining that her poems "not only look at history from the angle of forgotten mothers, daughters, widows and wives, but also build up a powerful mythology of motherhood as a socially self-sufficient state and a metaphorically longed-for ideal" and create a "woman-to-woman atmosphere" (17). Similarly, Eliot relocates home in "Agatha" to form her own idea of domesticity, which included female community, and to elevate and make universal the moral value of womanhood.

Despite her keen interest in travel and knowledge of foreign cultures, Eliot set most of her novels in the provinces of England.<sup>174</sup> It was her poetry that she often located in foreign places and /or times.<sup>175</sup> Just as Eliot was able to escape social alienation by traveling

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century, using religion as one of the key areas of growth, development and "home" for women's self-identification. Indeed, Eliot is using religion as a discursive framework: its legitimate status is primary, but she is also subversively deploying it in relation to women's autonomy and their public role. (92)

<sup>173</sup> Eliot's personal experience with travel no doubt influenced her decision to set her poetry in foreign lands. Foreign countries were often home for Eliot, and she found living abroad rejuvenating. She traveled all over Europe to study foreign languages and cultures, and she traveled to escape social alienation, finding solace in Germany after her elopement with Lewes. In her biography of Eliot, Barbara Hardy adds: "Her need for foreignness was political as well as personal. Before Geneva she had thought feelingly about nationalism and criticized English culture. She was not just tolerant of foreignness but, at times, sounds positively xenophilic" (47). John Rignall, in *George Eliot and Europe*, points out that for Eliot Europe "was no monolithic 'other' but a naturally accepted part of her heritage as an educated Englishwoman" (xi). Her knowledge of the world, he notes, was in part due to her interaction with other nations and races (xi). Nancy Henry discusses Eliot's investigations of people who lived "beyond the bounds of her personal lot" (*George Eliot* 13). Eliot, she explains, studied Jewish history, culture, and religion to better understand the "other" within England (13).

<sup>174</sup> *Romola*, set in fifteenth-century Florence, is the exception. Rignall notes: "With the exception of *Romola*, whose laborious reconstruction of fifteenth-century Florence owed in any case more to the lamp and the library than to the observing eye and the experience of contemporary Italy, George Eliot's extensive foreign travels left no novels as their direct product. Only the Roman scenes of Middlemarch and a few brief and scattered episodes elsewhere, most notably in *Daniel Deronda*, bear immediate testimony to her European journeys ("The Idea of Travel" 139). He points out that the idea of travel only plays a central role in one novel, *Daniel Deronda*, and does not discuss her poetry. In her poetry, mostly written later in life, as was *Daniel Deronda*, travel and journeying are regular motifs.

<sup>175</sup> "Agatha" and *Armgarth* are located in nineteenth-century Germany, and "How Lisa Loved the King" and *The Spanish Gypsy* are set in medieval Spain. The action of "The Legend of Jubal" and "The Death of

abroad, so she provided a space in which her characters could navigate their lives outside of English traditional codes of conduct. Armgart, Agatha, and *The Spanish Gypsy's* Fedalma reject marriage and decline to have children, they form atypical families, and they are foreigners and travelers. They are not expected to conform to British nineteenth-century societal standards of femininity. By setting their stories abroad, Eliot is free to create her own idea of society, and in this society, members (especially female members) cling to one another out of necessity. Feeling alienated allows them to better understand the lot of others. Thus, Eliot prepares readers for scenes of sympathy throughout her poetry.

Eliot wrote “Agatha” after a visit to Sankt Märgen, Germany (1868), where she and Lewes, along with acquaintances from Freiberg, Gräfin von Baudissin and her daughter, paid a memorable visit to the cottage of an old peasant woman (Haight 404). In the poem, the old woman figures as Agatha and the Gräfin von Baudissin figures as an angel named Countess Linda (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:69). In order to emphasize the centrality of home in the story, Eliot provides three descriptive snapshots of the landscape, all three reinforcing a connection between motherhood, sacredness, and home. First, she describes the broad landscape, an idyllic natural setting in which fertile Mother Earth welcomes all:

Come with me to the mountain, not where rocks  
 Soar harsh above the troops of hurrying pines,  
 But where the earth spreads soft and rounded breasts  
 To feed her children; where the generous hills  
 Lift a green isle betwixt the sky and plain

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Moses” takes place in biblical times, and the main character of “Jubal” journeys from the Middle East to India. “Erinna” takes place in seventh-century B.C.E. Greece.



To keep some Old World things aloof from change.  
 Here too 'tis hill and hollow: new-born streams  
 With sweet enforcement, joyously compelled  
 Like laughing children, hurry down the steeps,  
 And make a dimpled chase athwart the stones. . . . (51)

She uses heavenly terminology to describe the nurturing paradise (“A little world whose round / horizon cuts / This isle of hills with heaven for a sea”) and creates oxymoronic phrases using feminine language (“sweet enforcement” and “joyously compelled”) to draw the reader’s attention to the connection of the theme and the setting (51).<sup>176</sup>

In the second snapshot of the setting in “Agatha,” Eliot hones in on a religious town, named after Saint Mary, a place formerly inhabited by monks:

The monks of old chose here their still retreat,  
 And called it by the Blessed Virgin’s name,  
 Sancta Maria, which the peasant’s tongue,  
 Speaking from out the parent’s heart that turns  
 All loved things into little things, has made  
 Sanct Märgen,-- Holy little Mary, dear  
 As all the sweet home things she smiles upon. (51)

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<sup>176</sup> Eliot uses oxymoron in other poems that contain feminine and religious themes as well. In “Ex Oriente Lux,” Eliot presents a double birthing image (the birth of the earth and the birth of Thought) along with oxymoronic and paradoxical expressions (“sweet imprisonment,” “Dividing towards sublime union,” and “Clove sense and image subtly in twain”) to emphasize the complexity of religious and philosophical matters and to promote sympathy and appreciation for Eastern culture and religion (*Poems* 44). In “O May I Join the Choir Invisible” the phrases “immortal dead,” “divinely human,” and “diffusion ever more intense” convey the complexity of religious ideas and challenge the reader to consider a non-traditional notion, that sympathy toward others can be considered a religion (49-50). In “Erinna,” Eliot refers to “darling dragon Hate,” “rage divine,” and “terrible beauty” to describe the suffering of an innocent girl and elicit the pity of the reader (187-88).

Eliot uses feminine language and diminutives (“loved things,” “little things,” “Holy little Mary, dear,” and “sweet home things”) to make a connection between the sweet, domestic, Holy Mary and the “sweet home things” that Mary smiles upon. With this passage, Eliot the poetess seems to smile upon the reader with the same sweetness with which the Virgin Mary smiles on domestic life in the town, reminding readers that she, like the Virgin Mary, is a feminine, spiritual leader. Eliot reinforces the sacred yet common nature of the place by reminding the reader of the town’s connection to its divine yet humble origins:

What though a Queen? She puts her crown away  
 And with her little Boy wears common clothes,  
 Caring for common wants, remembering  
 That day when good Saint Joseph left his work  
 To marry her with humble trust sublime. (52)

The town reveres Mary as the community mother and caregiver, and the Matriarch, despite her divine connections, assumes a humble stature. She resides with, not above, the community and serves as intercessor for all:

Grandames and mothers and the flute-voiced girls,--  
 Fall on their knees and send forth prayerful cries  
 To the kind Mother with the little Boy,  
 Who pleads for helpless men against the storm,  
 Lightning and plagues and all terrific shapes  
 Of power supreme. (52)

Because of the influence of the Holy Mother, the townspeople venerate domesticity and femininity. The holy monks (representing a patriarchal divine order) are gone and forgotten,

and “their silent corridors / Are turned to homes of bare-armed, aproned men” / Who toil for wife and children” (52). Domestic men replace holy men in the sacred place where Catholic bells summon “To grave remembrance of the larger life / That bears our own, like perishable fruit / Upon its heaven-wide branches” (52). The image of men wearing aprons recalls the image of Joseph leaving his work to marry the Holy Mother (51-52), and the Catholic bells from a nearby funeral signify the continuity of religion and community. Saints living and dead share the same sacred location and participate in community life that continues to thrive.

The third setting snapshot hones in on the idyllic scene even more closely, offering further connections of sacredness and home. The reader enters the “prettiest hollow of these hills” in which Agatha’s cottage is located (52). Again, Eliot goes into elaborate description of the scene to draw attention to the hallowed importance of the place. Near the cottage stands a shrine decorated with “heaven-planted, incense-mingling flowers” with an altar to the Virgin Mary:

Within, the altar where the Mother sits  
 ‘Mid votive tablets hung from far-off years  
 By peasants succoured in the peril of fire,  
 Fever, or flood, who thought that Mary’s love,  
 Willing but not omnipotent, had stood  
 Between their lives and that dread power which slew  
 Their neighbor at their side. (53)

Eliot reminds the reader of Mary’s (and her own) intercessory role in the community while linking the sacred altar outside the cottage to the cottage itself, which Agatha treats as an

“honoured relic” (53). Agatha’s home is a holy shrine, containing Catholic books, pictures of immortalized women saints (“little pictures hung a-row, / Telling the stories of Saint Ursula, / And Saint Elizabeth, the lowly queen”), and pictures over her bed, including “one the Virgin’s death, / And one her flowering tomb, while high above / She smiling bends and lets her girdle down / For ladder to the souls that cannot trust / In life which outlasts burial” (54). In this consecrated place, Agatha takes care of her cousins Kate and Nell, who “Are housed by her in Love and Duty’s name, / They being feeble, with small withered wits, / And she believing that the higher gift / Was given to be shared” (53). The poem’s lengthy description of setting establishes the religious significance of home and caring for others.<sup>177</sup> Eliot increases the sacred imagery each time she narrows in on the description of the location. She takes the reader from a broad landscape (mother Earth) to a closer view of the area (Sankt

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<sup>177</sup> “A London Drawingroom,” in contrast to “Agatha,” relies on setting to provide a picture of a life without sympathy:

The sky is cloudy, yellowed by the smoke.  
 For view there are the houses opposite  
 Cutting the sky with one long line of wall  
 Like solid fog: far as the eye can stretch  
 Monotony of surface & of form  
 Without a break to hang a guess upon.  
 No bird can make a shadow as it flies,  
 For all is shadow, as in ways o'erhung  
 By thickest canvass, where the golden rays  
 Are clothed in hemp. No figure lingering  
 Pauses to feed the hunger of the eye  
 Or rest a little on the lap of life.  
 All hurry on and look upon the ground,  
 Or glance unmarking at the passers by  
 The wheels are hurrying too, cabs, carriages  
 All closed, in multiplied identity.  
 The world seems one huge prison-house and court  
 Where men are punished at the slightest cost,  
 With lowest rate of colour, warmth and joy. (*Poems* 41)

The narrator in the London drawing-room looks out the window to a scene in which people rush through the smoggy, dark, and lonely city without eye contact or care for one another. Apathy replaces sympathy in this prison-like dystopia. “Agatha,” by contrast, portrays a peaceful, idyllic heaven on earth characterized by a community that loves and sympathizes.

Märgen), offering an intimate look at Agatha's cottage that is near a community shrine to Mary and described as a holy living shrine itself. The reader finally enters this holy of holies after a three-page descriptive journey to learn the story of a life sympathetically (and therefore sacredly) lived.

An examination of Eliot's characterization of Agatha also reveals how she elevated the domestic realm and the role of motherhood in the poem. Eliot presents Agatha as a divine representation of the feminine ideal. Through dialogue with Countess Linda and through association with the Virgin Mary, Agatha attains an other-worldly status as domestic perfection itself. She lives in a sacred home and like the Holy Mother Mary receives visits from angels: "For in the slanting sunbeams angels come / And visit Agatha who dwells within" (53). One such angel is Countess Linda, whom Eliot presents as a beautiful aristocrat. It is unclear whether Linda is alive or dead (appearing in spirit form) since the action shifts from present tense (for the description of setting) to past tense (for the relation of the story).<sup>178</sup> Linda was likely a member of the community who was young at the time of the story or who died when young—"her years were few" (54). She has the authority of a spiritual teacher and is the picture of feminine perfection:

The angel was a lady, noble, young,  
 Taught in all seemliness that fits a court,

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<sup>178</sup> Referring to Countess Linda as an angel and portraying Agatha as spiritual perfection might be a nod to the "angel in the house" ideal, made popular by the narrative poem by Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, which portrays the perfect Victorian woman as devoted and submissive to her husband. Eliot's letters do not make clear whether or not she read this poem, but the popularization of the concept by the 1860s makes it likely that she was familiar with the expression. Eliot's angels in "Agatha," however, are either dead or unmarried, and they are not beholden to one husband and one household, but to other women and to the entire community.

All lore that shapes the mind to delicate use,  
 Yet quiet, lowly, as a meek white dove  
 That with its presence teaches gentleness.  
 Men called her Countess Linda; little girls  
 In Freiburg town, orphans whom she caressed,  
 Said Mamma Linda: yet her years were few,  
 Her outward beauties all in budding time,  
 Her virtues the aroma of the plant  
 That dwells in all its being, root, stem, leaf,  
 And waits not ripeness. (53-54)

Known by the town's orphans as "Mamma Linda," she devoted her life to caring for the helpless. Agatha, too, has devoted her life to caring for others. She cared for "an old afflicted pair, / Who wore out slowly" thirty years ago and left her their cottage after they died (55), and then cared for Kate and Nell, her feeble-minded cousins, in her one room cottage. Linda and Agatha comprise a composite of the feminine ideal. They are both likened to the Holy Mother Mary who, having the status of a Queen, "puts her crown away... / Caring for common wants" (51). Linda, the young, beautiful, noble woman, represents the Queen, and Agatha, the poor, old woman whose "grey hair is a crown" (60) represents the common Mary. Both care for the "common wants" of the community.

The purpose of the dialogue between Linda and Agatha is to reveal the character of Agatha and present a picture of sympathetic female community. Through Linda's questions, the reader learns that Agatha, like Mary, is the divine intercessor for the community. She prays for others in the community:

...I pray, I pray  
 For poor young Hans. I take it much to heart  
 That other people are worse off than I,--  
 I ease my soul with praying for them all.

.....  
 . . . the Virgin's heart  
 Is kinder far than mine; and then I stop  
 And feel I can do nought towards helping men,  
 Till out it comes, like tears that will not hold,  
 And I must pray again for all the world. (57)

Agatha also takes pilgrimages to purge her life of sin in order to be a perfect intercessor for the community: "I try / All ways I know of to be cleansed and pure. / I would not sink where evil spirits are. / There's perfect goodness somewhere: so I strive" (57). Like Jubal, Agatha undertakes the pilgrimage for the sake of the community and finds the travel experience regenerating and purifying (105, 57). Also like Jubal, she alone takes on the atoning responsibility for all the community:

. . . people are busy here  
 The beasts want tendance. One who is not missed  
 Can go and pray for others who must work.  
 I owe it to all neighbours, young and old;  
 For they are good past thinking,--lads and girls  
 Given to mischief, merry naughtiness,  
 Quiet, as the hedgehogs smooth their spines,

For fear of hurting poor old Agatha.  
 'Tis pretty: why, the cherubs in the sky  
 Look young and merry and the angels play  
 On citherns, lutes, and all sweet instruments.  
 I would have young things merry. See the Lord !  
 A little baby playing with the birds;  
 And how the Blessed Mother smiles at him. (58)

Agatha recognizes her immortal saintly role. As the narrator reminded the reader early in the poem that the Catholic bells summoned “To grave remembrance of the larger life / That bears our own” (52), Agatha reminds Linda that, like the Virgin Mary enshrined on the hill and like the saints portrayed in her home, she will do her work for the community and then pass on so that others can continue the effort. She too will join the saintly choir invisible:

I shall get helpless, blind,  
 Be like an old stalk to be plucked away:  
 The garden must be cleared for young spring plants.  
 'T is home beyond the grave, the most are there,  
 All those we pray to, all the Church's lights,—  
 And poor old souls are welcome in their rags:  
 One sees it by the pictures. Good Saint Ann,  
 The Virgin's mother, she is very old,  
 And had her troubles with her husband too.  
 Poor Kate and Nell are younger far than I,  
 But they will have this roof to cover them.



I shall go willingly; and willingness

Makes the yoke easy and the burden light.

Despite her death, she will live on in the minds and hearts of those she touched with her sympathetic acts. The community recognizes Agatha as their divine intercessor and saint, and at the end of the dialogue between Linda and Agatha, the narrator, one member of the community, returns to present tense to relate the legacy of the now dead Agatha. In doing so, he/she enshrines her memory for future generations:

I liked to hear her name,

As that of one half granddame and half saint,

Uttered with reverent playfulness. The lads

And younger men all called her mother, aunt,

Or granny, with their pet diminutives,

And bade their lasses and their brides behave

Right well to one who surely made a link

‘Twixt faulty fold and God by loving both:

Not one but counted service done by her. (60)

The community recognizes Agatha as mother to the community. They give her diminutive nicknames as a sign of affection (as the monks gave the diminutive name Sankt Märgen to recognize the role of Mother Mary in the town) and sing songs, written by the poet Hans for whom she specifically prayed, to celebrate her life (56). At times of celebration (“feasts and weddings”), groups in the community sing the songs when they pass Agatha’s home. Hans’s ten-stanza song celebrates their community and Agatha who helps them. They cheer together as they return home from celebrations: “Midnight by the chapel bell! / Homeward, homeward

all, farewell! / I with you, and you with me, / Miles are short with company” (61) and petition the “Holy Babe” to “Bind us fast to one another!” (61). They remember those who have passed on, like Toni whose “ghost is wandering now, / Shaped just like a snow-white cow” (61), and they give his ghost “good cheer” (61). They sing “good words” for Agatha, Kate and Nell as they pass the cottage and wish the “Little maidens old, sweet dreams! / Sleep one sleep till morning beams” (62). They praise them for helping as mothers to the community: “Mothers ye, who help us all, Quick at hand, if ill befall” (62), and they ask “Holy Gabriel” to “Bless the aged mother-maiden!” (62). Each six-line stanza ends with a two-line refrain asking “Heart of Mary” (six times), “Holy Babe, our God and Brother,” “Good Saint Joseph,” “Meek Saint Anna,” and “Holy Gabriel” for protection, comfort, unity, faithfulness, joy, blessings for the elderly, uprightness, and a place with the saints (61-63). This prayer-song in honor of Agatha celebrates and immortalizes her life as saint and mother to the community. Similarly, the poem itself immortalizes the noble idea of living a saintly life through intercessory acts for the community.

Eliot appeals to domestic perfection and saintly motherhood in her creation of “Agatha” to convey the idea that sympathy for others creates a vibrant, blessed community. By likening Agatha to angels, the Virgin Mary, and the saints on the walls of her home, Eliot communicates the idea that people who live sympathetically toward others provide a sacred service for the community. The saintly women in the story are all dead but remain a vibrant part of the community and provide a sacrosanct model for future generations. By depicting motherhood metaphorically rather than realistically, by connecting femininity and sainthood, and by presenting the home as a sacred environment, Eliot takes advantages of nineteenth-century domestic values to communicate a message about the importance of treating others

sympathetically. Eliot, like Agatha, was not a biological mother, but she was a spiritual mother to the community. She represents the feminine ideal as a poetess with divine authority to act as intercessor for her readership, and her poem is a prayer for her readers that aims to enlighten, connect, and elevate spiritually.

## CONCLUSION

Eliot relied on poetess themes, such as female community and motherhood, which were associated with a stance of sympathy. She presented unmarried women without children who lived in non-traditional, female families as worthy examples of sympathetic members of the community. She thus celebrates motherhood in her poems by displacing biological motherhood and direct care for children. Agatha, mother to her community, represents the sympathetic ideal that Armgart learns. Agatha lives on in the singing voices of the young people in the community that she touched, and Armgart will live on in singing voices of the young women she will teach.

Likewise, Eliot will live on in the voices of her poems and through the lessons about sympathy that she preached. Like her characters, she too identified with the role of mother and embraced the role of spiritual guide to her community of readers. Neither her status as a fallen woman nor her rejection of traditional Christianity hindered her from assuming a position as spiritual leader to the nation. She guided others toward a better way of life—that of caring for others—by writing poetry within a tradition that associated itself with feminine piety and spiritual authority. For Eliot, exercising sympathy for others was the highest achievement for humanity, and she wrote to teach the value of such an achievement. Readers who take into account Eliot's poetess treatment of community and motherhood come to view

her not only as a writer of fiction, an intellectual, and a social commentator but also as a woman who longed to nurture, participate in, and foster human relationships.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Conclusion: The Future of George Eliot Studies

“Every one of those [poems] I now send you represents an idea which I care for strongly and wish to propagate as far as I can. Else I should forbid myself from adding to the mountainous heap of poetical collections”

-George Eliot

Eliot’s fame as a novelist overshadowed her work as a poet, but her poetry embodied ideas she greatly valued. Her role as a poet was deeply meaningful to her, and she spent much of her time as an artist writing verse. She turned to poetry for solace after the deaths of her father, her step-son Thornie, and her partner, George Lewes, and she put aside her novels at times to work on poetry.<sup>179</sup> She interrupted *Felix Holt* to work on *The Spanish Gypsy* and *Middlemarch* to write “The Legend of Jubal” and *Armgarth*. She set aside *Daniel Deronda* to collect a volume of poems, *The Legend of Jubal, and Other Poems*, though many of the poems had already been published in magazines (Haight 473). Nancy Henry explains that Eliot turned to poetry, “the highest and most serious form of writing,” out of a “sense of what a great author should do for mankind” (*Cambridge Introduction* 83). She further states:

Perhaps it was a remnant of a previous generation’s aesthetic and moral bias, recalling her youthful puritanical renunciation of novels as wicked. Or, perhaps Eliot simply could not feel herself the equal of contemporaries such as Tennyson, much less past greats such as Wordsworth, Scott, Goethe, Milton or Shakespeare, until she had tried her hand at both epic and lyric poetry. (83-84)

To what extent Eliot sought to rank herself among past great writers is not clear. What is

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<sup>179</sup> She wrote “As Tu Vu” after her father’s death (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:27) and “Jubal” after Thornie died (Haight 465). After Lewes’s death, she stayed alone in her room reading and copying sections of *In Memoriam* (516-17).

clear, however, is that she wrote poetry, despite the fact that it earned her much less in terms of money and acclaim than writing fiction, and in doing so, assumed a prophetic voice through the highest form of art in order “to propagate as far as [she could]” the ideas for which she cared so strongly (*Letters* 6:26).

Eliot adopted the feminine poetess persona only after her early public writing career as an anonymous reviewer at the *Westminster Review* and after the pseudonymous (supposedly male) authorship of *The Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*. After she established herself as a novelist, she began writing poetry in earnest, and her readers ultimately associated her famous male name with the feminine poetess. Readers of her novels would have seen her poetry as works of moral instruction rather than as works of entertainment, and they would have understood Eliot’s role as that of a public novelist taking on a poetess stance to voice a guiding message for her readership. As Laporte states, she “embraces stereotypically feminine poetic models as an influence that should change the cultural landscape, and even have a guiding influence akin to that of the Bible (“Poetess as Prophet” 159). She was famous, influential, and prominent in changing the thought in nineteenth-century England via her novels and German translations. As a poetess, she used her influence to write with a moral imperative to make a better society. Modern readers as a whole, however, remain unfamiliar with this important genre of Eliot’s oeuvre in part because the poems have not been easily accessible. Until 1989, a collected volume of her poetry had been unavailable. Readers may also lack familiarity with Eliot’s poetry because modern criticism has largely classified her verse as inferior or as departing from her artistic aim (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 1:xxxvi-xxxix) and thus unworthy of study. In order to have a fuller appreciation of who George Eliot was as a writer and of her works as a whole, readers

should also read her poetry. An accurate picture of Eliot includes study of the novelist who appeared as a man and the poetess who used her femininity.

This dissertation has demonstrated one way to view Eliot's work as a poet: through her stance as a poetess who propagated the feminine value of sympathy through a voice of moral and spiritual authority. I have argued that Eliot assumed the stance of a poetess to encourage sympathetic relations between the sexes and among those with different religious views and lifestyles. Sympathy, for Eliot, led to a moral society, and the role of a poet, for her, was to heighten the readers' awareness of the salvific power of sympathy and guide them toward a better way of living for all humanity. Eliot's emphasis on sympathy may have stemmed in part from her own experience as an outsider in society. She longed to be understood and to be a part of the community. She valued human relationships and was hurt by her brother's and society's alienating her. She chose a lifestyle that many deemed immoral, yet she championed morality by upholding the notion that sympathy itself embodied that which was best in religion and that those who treated others with compassion best understood the concept of God. Her personal choices also meant that she could not be a legal wife or actual mother. Yet, she assumed these roles, accomplishing a domestic and spiritual ideal through her poetess stance. Eliot took on the converging roles of poetess, sage, moral leader, and mother to the nation and aspired to the highest of cultural roles and influence while appropriating the most modest and feminine means to further this end. In much of her poetry, she appeared to uphold traditional, domestic values while sometimes inserting controversial views in order to promote compassion, fairness, and fellow-feeling. Poetry was not a departure from her artistic aim but rather an extension of it. She could comment on social issues more assertively in her poetry than in fiction because poetry

allowed for a measure of disguise behind feminine expression and within the confined quarters of verse form. Scholars may wish to further examine how Eliot fits into the poetess tradition by discussing poems not discussed here and by interpreting her poems alongside those of other poetesses who inspired her and whom she inspired. Such analyses would make more complete the understanding of nineteenth-century women poets by recovering one more woman poet whose conspicuous presence as one of the century's great authors renders her omission all the more surprising.

#### POETIC THEMES

Examining Eliot's poetry through her feminine stance as a poetess is but one way to view her poetic oeuvre. Her poetry invites further exploration through her use of this feminine tradition as well as through other perspectives. Many of her unanalyzed (or under-analyzed) poems shed light on her social views, and thematic studies of these poems will bring about a better understanding of Eliot's thought and expression of those views. For example, Eliot criticism still wants a thorough analysis of religious elements in "The Legend of Jubal," "The Minor Prophet," and "The Death of Moses." LaPorte provides excellent examples of such studies in "George Eliot: The Poetess as Prophet" and in *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, in which he shows how Eliot uses domestic, sentimental tropes and relies on biblical subjects in her poems to demonstrate the vatic power "that derived from sympathy, from a sentiment that in Eliot's culture had become the province of women" (*Victorian Poets* 226). Scholars have said little more about these poems, but Eliot's interest in Judaism, prophecy, and biblical myths invites fuller examinations.

An in-depth discussion of the role of music in Eliot's poetry is also still wanting. "O



May I Join,” “Jubal,” “Armgart,” “Arion,” and “Stradivarius” all present music as a central theme. Music in these poems provides the means to immortality, and the musician (and by extension, the poet whose poems are songs) comments on the immortalizing power of music.<sup>180</sup> For example, in “Stradivarius” and “Legend,” central characters create an instrument that brings sacred music to the community. Both characters struggle with the egoistic ambition that comes from their power as creators and lose sight of the real purpose for their gift—to serve God by uniting the community through the saving power of music. Stradivarius views his master skill in making violins as a gift that helps God rather than as a gift from God. He “should rob God” if he did not make violins because “not God Himself can make man’s best / Without best men to help him” (*Poems* 158). Eliot punishes such creative hubris in “Jubal.” Jubal’s “burning need / To claim his fuller self” by declaring himself the creator of the lyre to his community to gain fame leads to rejection and ultimately death; the community, in disbelief, beats him for blasphemy and leaves him for dead. An examination of these two poems, which may also include “Armgart,” would add to an understanding of the religious function of music in Eliot’s work and shed light on her personal struggle with artistic ambition.

The concept of memory also pervades Eliot’s poetry. She grapples with memory, time, change, and past and present in “As Tu Vu,” “O May I Join,” “Lisa,” “Brother and Sister,” “Jubal,” “Two Lovers,” “Self and Life,” “Sweet Evenings,” “I Grant You Ample Leave,” and *The Spanish Gypsy* to comment on how memory serves as a reminder of the

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<sup>180</sup> Beryl Gray’s *George Eliot and Music* discusses the importance of music in the life and works of Eliot, and Phyllis Weliver’s *The Figure of Music in Nineteenth-Century British Poetry* includes some of Eliot’s poems in its analysis of music in the nineteenth-century. However, the prevalence of music in her poems calls for a focused analysis of its role in Eliot’s poetry.

natural process of the development of the individual and the community. Van den Broek remarks that memory is a critical part of Eliot's organicism: "The recollection of things past is part of the process of organic continuity within the individual life, the continuity between a formative past and a present identity. . . . Time and change threaten identity but memory maintains the integrity of the individual" (*Complete Shorter Poetry* 2:10). In "Sister and Brother," the narrator "cannot choose but think upon" formative years of life with her brother, including "dire years whose awful name is Change" (*Poems* 84, 90). Memory forces her to analyze how life's painful changes molded her into the person she ultimately becomes. In "Jubal," memory shapes not just the individual but also the community as a whole. As van den Broek says, "Memory [discloses] her face divine" to remind people of death and change and urge them to seek immortality through creating art that will live on in the lives of others' memories (94). Memory in "Jubal" concerns herself not with individual identity but with collective identity. Jubal seeks the familiarity of "those first eager years," and longs for the recognition of his tribe but instead encounters "Dread Change, with dubious face and cold / That never kept a welcome for the old" (107-08). Dreadful change creates a new world that worships and enjoys artistic inventions, such as music, and appropriates the best of human innovation to develop collectively without regard or reverence for the wishes of the individual who helped bring about such development. Jubal's seeking fame shows that he lost sight of the communal purpose of creating. The poem thus urges the artist to create and then relinquish personal claims to the art with the understanding that the art exists to serve and develop an ever-changing society. These brief examples show how Eliot's treatment of memory and change calls for further investigation in her poems.

My discussion of community in chapter four only brushes the surface of the

overarching theme of community in Eliot's poetry. Eliot addresses the themes of community and isolation in "Farewell," "Sonnet," "In a London Drawingroom," "Two Lovers," "O May I Join," "Agatha," "Lisa," "Armgarth," "Brother and Sister," "Erinna," "Jubal," and *The Spanish Gypsy*. She approaches these themes from various angles. For example, "Sonnet" and "In a London Drawingroom" create a mood of disillusionment by depicting a lonely moment and an isolating setting. In both these poems, readers feel imprisoned and alienated. In "As Tu Vu" and "Two Lovers," on the other hand, Eliot creates a mood inspired by romantic love. The narrator of "As Tu Vu" compares the beautiful sight of stars reflected in dew drops and the glorious scent of a flower in one's coat pocket to the beauty of a noble soul, "une belle âme" (30). The narrator urges his/her lover (and readers) to hold on to such sweet memories that unite one another. "Two Lovers" binds together lovers not through memories triggered by moments in time but through the collective memories of a life spent together. Both poems celebrate the joy of togetherness. These poems present vivid portraits of community and isolation, and a number of other poems contrast these ideas to promote Eliot's cherished belief in the value of living in cooperation and with mutual understanding.<sup>181</sup> All of these themes additionally lend themselves to comparative analyses in Eliot's novels and poetry. Examining Eliot's use of religion, music, memory, and community in her poetry could add new dimensions to current readings of her novels.

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<sup>181</sup> Others thematic avenues for exploration in Eliot's poems, all of which overlap with the theme of religion, include suffering (see "Lisa," "Question and Answer," *Armgarth*, "Erinna," "Self and Life," "Jubal," "Arion," and *The Spanish Gypsy*), death (see "Farewell," "O May I Join," "Lisa," "Sweet Evenings," "Death of Moses," "Jubal," *Armgarth*, "Arion," "Self and Life," and *The Spanish Gypsy*), the concept of the soul (see "Mid the Rich Store," "O May I Join," "Agatha," "Lisa," "As Tu Vu," "Brother and Sister," "Erinna," "Death of Moses," *The Spanish Gypsy*), and renunciation (see "Lisa," "Jubal," *Armgarth*, "Arion," "Death of Moses," and *The Spanish Gypsy*).

## OVERLAPPING THEMES IN POETRY AND NOVELS

Many themes in Eliot's poetry also find life in her fiction, and thematic comparisons can expand the meaning of the fiction, particularly (but not exclusively) in the cases in which she wrote poetry at or around the same time as novels. Margaret Reynolds states:

George Eliot's poetry functions as a parallel text to the novels; many of the same concerns and themes are taken up there, and quite often a poetic text, composed at about the same time as a novel, will reflect and enlarge upon the prose. This is nowhere more obvious than in the case of the verse drama "Armngart" which was written while George Eliot was working on *Middlemarch*, but there are other cases too. (*Oxford Readers Companion* 304)<sup>182</sup>

Reynolds is right. Eliot interrupted writing *Middlemarch* (1869-72) to compose "Lisa" (1869), "Brother and Sister" (1869), and *Armngart* (1870), and one can find parallel themes in all of these works. For example, as I discussed in chapter two, Eliot makes subversive comments on marriage in "Lisa;" however, her simultaneous treatment of marriage in *Middlemarch* is less controversial. Dorothea does not need to marry, but she does. She renounces her wealth and philanthropic aspirations to take on the traditional role of wife and mother. The narrator in the finale comments: "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that

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<sup>182</sup> Nancy Henry also points out the fact that Eliot's novels and poetry contain parallel themes, explaining that "in the poems she intentionally distills ideas which in the novels are diffused in the larger artistic project of creating a realistic, multi-faceted fictional world" (83). Henry claims that Eliot's poems "single out for emphasis ideas and emotions that are present in the novels" while at the same time, they "provide insight into what she thought poetry ought to be and do and in turn what she thought fiction should be and do" (*Cambridge Introduction* 84).

was in her power she ought rather to have done” (836). Such is the view of many readers and critics today. Dorothea’s marriage seems like capitulation to society’s gender normative expectations, but as the narrator states, what else was she to do? She did what was expected. Eliot offered a less risky view of marriage in her widely read novel, and in doing so avoided censure.<sup>183</sup> Both the poem and the novel leave the reader somewhat dissatisfied with the marriage of the protagonists; however, Eliot made a much bolder statement condemning nineteenth-century marriage practices in her poem.

The most obvious case in which Eliot’s poetry functions as a parallel text includes “Brother and Sister” and *Mill on the Floss* (though not written same time). Eliot’s novel, *Mill on the Floss*, also details the lives of two siblings, Maggie and Tom Tulliver, who grow up in a rural setting. The novel, like the poem, depicts the tension between the siblings due to the sister’s non-conformity to gender rules and the brother’s disapproval. The novel concludes with the death of the reunited siblings, and the poem concludes with a divorce and a liberated sister-poet. Eliot frees the non-conforming sister in “Brother and Sister” and drowns her in *Mill on the Floss*. The sister in the poem suffers the loss of her brother but thrives personally through the power of imagination and her ability to express herself through the art of writing. The sister in the novel in the end regains her brother’s affection but dies. Both sisters suffer because they are girls, but the sister-narrator has the power to recreate her life through verse

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<sup>183</sup> Some marriages are emotionally fulfilling (such as the unions of Fred and Mary in *Middlemarch* and Adam and Dinah in *Adam Bede*), and some result in disillusionment and unhappiness. Women in Eliot’s novels, though not the sole sufferers, more often suffer in bad marriages because of their greater need to marry. Without many options for work and with no legal entitlement to property, women had to rely on marriage for survival and were expected to be dutiful, loyal, and submissive to their husbands. Most of Eliot’s wives submit to their husbands. Rosamond Lydgate in *Middlemarch* is an obvious exception. Her strong will and self-centeredness clash with her husband’s expectations for submissiveness, and consequently the relationship is a disaster.

and live on in the minds of her readers. Eliot was able to speak out on gender matters more freely in her poetry because her poetry presented the material in a less overt manner. Aware of the fact that readers scrutinized novels more thoroughly than poetry for immoral content, Eliot was safer to develop these themes more discreetly, through verse.

## POETIC EPIGRAPHS

Another avenue for future Eliot studies includes study of her poetic epigraphs. Margaret Reynolds points out the fact that most people who have read Eliot's novels have also inadvertently read her poetry in the form of epigraphs. Eliot's epigraphs served as chapter headings in some of her novels to offer thematic parallels and metaphoric evaluations of characters.<sup>184</sup> J. R. Tye explains that Eliot used these epigraphs (or "mottoes" as she called them) in the tradition of Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray and examines Eliot's painstaking process of writing and incorporating epigraphs in her later novels (*Felix Holt, the Radical*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*), the reasons she used them, and the function they served (235). He focuses on her own prose and poetic epigraphs as opposed to ones she borrowed from other authors. David Higdon helpfully notes that of the 225 epigraphs in her works, 96 are original and 129 are borrowed from 56 identified authors and eight anonymous authors to point out the fact that though she drew from a variety of sources, she often relied on her own creativity to craft introductory statements (128-29). Higdon shows that she consciously designed the epigraphs to form a central part of the structure of her novels and refers to her

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<sup>184</sup> For more on Eliot's use of epigraphs, see van den Broek's discussion in *Complete Shorter Poetry* 2:129-30 and his entry on epigraphs in the *Oxford Reader's Companion* 100. Also, to read Eliot's own thoughts on incorporating epigraphs, see her letters to her publisher John Blackwood in 1876 (*Letters* 6:241) and 1873 (5:458-59).

comments in the essay “Notes on Form in Art” about the wholeness of a work evolving from a union of smaller parts. Her concern with the relationship between the parts and the whole of a work, explains Higdon, implies that “she was highly selective in admitting into her novels only that which was consistent with the overall design” (133-34). He analyzes various epigraphs to show how they served a structuring function in the novels. Reynolds also explores the function of Eliot’s epigraphs:

The epigraphs serve both as a clue to what will follow in each chapter, and as an alternative, often ironic, commentary on what has gone before—depending on whether you read them before, or after, or even refer to them during, the reading of a chapter. The mixture of “real” quotations borrowed from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and the Bible, as well as many other sources, put alongside the “made up” quotations which are George Eliot’s own means that Eliot makes herself into one of the sages whose word is a form of law, a yardstick for moral reading and thinking. (*Oxford Reader’s Companion* 304)

Few critics have found interest in the overall structuring function of Eliot’s epigraphs. Further analysis of the epigraphs as poetic parallel texts to Eliot’s novels could provide rich insight into her participation in a tradition of novelists relying on poetry and her use of her own poetry to provide a guiding, moral voice in her novels. Eliot incorporated more epigraphs in her later novels than in early ones. She wrote these final novels at a time when she was establishing herself as a poetess. She thus used her poetess persona in her novels not only to provide parallel themes but also to remind her readers that she wrote fiction as an entertainer and as a moral guide. She therefore encouraged readers to enter into the lives of the characters with a sense of moral obligation to feel and relate to the characters’ struggles

and sorrows. So she was able to encourage sympathy in her fiction with the authority of a poetess.

## SYMPATHY IN POETRY AND NOVELS

Scholars might also consider a comparative study of Eliot's approach to sympathy in her poetry and novels.<sup>185</sup> Though she encourages sympathy in most of her works, she approaches sympathy differently in her poetry. Readers of her novels enter into the lives of characters by empathizing with the hardships of some characters, condemning the selfish motives of other characters, and identifying with the noble and ignoble alike through Eliot's careful creation of flawed, realistic people in her stories. In her poetry, on the other hand, she relies less on characterization and realistic portrayals. Instead, she draws on the power of verse form and poetic techniques, her own relationship to the reader as moral guide, and, at times, religious themes and language to convey a message of sympathy. For example, in her lyric poem, "O May I Join," she assures the reward of immortality for those who strive for "generosity," "deeds of daring rectitude," and "thoughts sublime." Her use of religious language and themes and the musical iambic pentameter uplifts the reader, making him/her feel a part of a chanting choir aspiring to otherworldly greatness. Readers identify not with a struggling, realistic character but rather with a nameless narrator who, like any reader, feels moved by the beauty of the language and spiritual message of the poem and connected by a

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<sup>185</sup> In her article, "On Suffering and Sympathy: Jude the Obscure, Evolution, and Ethics," Caroline Sumpter illustrates one particular possibility for future Eliot studies focusing on sympathy. She argues that Thomas Hardy's fascination with the "natural history" of sympathy prompted him to participate in a conversation about the evolutionary significance of sympathy in *Jude the Obscure*. Eliot Scholars might also find it fruitful to examine her poetry and fiction as they reveal her views on social evolution, sympathy, and morality.



desire to join the choir invisible. In “Brother and Sister,” Eliot employs meter, sonnet form, and contrasting images of confinement and freedom to create a mood in which the reader identifies with the female narrator who seeks to escape unfair gender boundaries and live a life of freedom, truth-seeking, love, and creative expression. In both poems, Eliot invites the reader to identify with the narrator by entering into the life of the poem via meter, form, and musical expression.<sup>186</sup>

In her dramatic and heroic poetry (*Armgart*, “Agatha,” “A Minor Prophet,” “The Death of Moses,” “Jubal,” “Lisa,” and *The Spanish Gypsy*), Eliot extols the virtue of sympathy through stories of characters who embark on spiritual journeys.<sup>187</sup> In these poems, Eliot creates characters, but she does not develop them through psychological realism as she does in her novels. Thus, the readers encounter poetic characters not as people but as representations of ideas. For example, readers identify with *Armgart* and Jubal, both of whom represent artistic creation, through their quests, in which they learn to overcome ego and discover the greater values of community and selflessness. Similarly, Fedalma faces a dilemma in which she must choose between personal and community good. Unlike *Armgart* and Jubal, Fedalma is not egocentric. Rather, she faces two paths, and both are arguably virtuous, but one is more admirable than the other. She chooses the higher calling and overcomes her desire for personal happiness for the greater good of the community. She

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<sup>186</sup> Henry correctly states that Eliot freed herself from her self-imposed restrictions of realism and conformed to the metrical restrictions of poetry in order to express “most purely a set of beliefs: in the need to strive for the high ideals of art in “The Legend of Jubal” (1870) and *Armgart* (1871); altruism in “Agatha” (1869) and *Armgart*; love in “How Lisa Loved the King” (1869); and corporate identity in *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) (*Cambridge Introduction* 84).

<sup>187</sup> For a discussion of Eliot’s cult of duty, her view of poetry as a higher art form than prose, and the motivation behind her epic ambitions, see Charles Laporte’s discussion of *The Spanish Gypsy* and “The Legend of Jubal” in *Victorian Poets*, in which he treats Eliot’s connecting poetry and religious sentiment “through an affective, implicitly feminine poetics compatible with secularization and materialism but plainly growing out of English Christian tradition” (197-98).

weds the curse of her outcast Zincalo people instead of her lover, Don Silva, and sacrifices her chance to have children in order to take on the higher calling of being a mother to a nation. Critics debate Eliot's meaning in offering such choices to her main character; such a debate reveals the poem's ability to draw readers into the story. By having Fedalma choose to sympathize with an outcast tribe and renounce personal desire, Eliot challenges readers to question what they would do in her position. She successfully engenders reader sympathy not by developing Fedalma as an identifiable character through means of realism but rather by upholding her as an ideal representation of duty and compassion. In these and many of her poems, Eliot elicits sympathy through various means, including meter, form, and representation of ideals. Adding Eliot's treatment of sympathy in poetry to similar discussions of her novels would further illuminate Eliot's views on this encompassing ideology.

#### POETRY WITHIN POETRY

Another avenue for future study involves Eliot's drawing attention to the role of poetry in her poems. Eliot comments on the role of the poet and the craft of poetry-writing through the narrator's self-referential "lines" in "Brother and Sister" and in the self-creating "words" and "definitions" in "I Grant You Ample Leave." She extends this technique in two other poems ("Lisa," and *The Spanish Gypsy*) by including whole lyric poems within the title poems and by having the narrator and characters comment on the power of the poetry. In "Lisa," a young girl enlists the help of a musician (Minuccio) who enlists further help of a

poet (Mico) to create a poem about Lisa's great love for King Pedro.<sup>188</sup> Minuccio asks Mico to write lyrics for the love song, and Mico explains the poetry-writing process: "that thought is poesy, / I need but listen as it sings to me" (*Poems* 73). After three days, "When linkèd notes had perfected the lay," Minuccio sings the song to the court to powerful effect:

The strain was new. It seemed a pleading cry,  
 And yet a rounded, perfect melody,  
 Making grief beauteous as the tear-filled eyes  
 Of little child at little miseries.  
 Trembling at first, then swelling as it rose,  
 Like rising light that broad and broader grows,  
 It filled the hall, and so possessed the air,  
 That not one living, breathing soul was there,  
 Though dullest, slowest, but was quivering  
 In Music's grasp, and forced to hear her sing.  
 But most such sweet compulsion took the mood  
 Of Pedro (tired of doing what he would).

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<sup>188</sup> To prepare the reader for the effect of the love poem, the narrator first reports the healing effect of Minuccio's music on Lisa who is dying from love for the king:

. . . he preluded  
 With magic hand, that summoned from the strings  
 Aerial spirits, rare yet vibrant wings  
 That fanned the pulses of his listener,  
 And waked each sleeping sense with blissful stir  
 . . . . .  
 . . . her faith had grown  
 To trust him as if missioned like a priest  
 With some high grace, that when his singing ceased  
 Still made him wiser, more magnanimous  
 Than common men who had no genius. (71-72)

Minuccio's music soothes Lisa and wakes her from the throes of death. The musician-priest prays for her through song, and the prayer has a salutary effect.

Whether the words which that strange meaning bore

Were but the poet's feigning, or aught more,

.....

For, though they came behind all former rhymes,

The verses were not bad for these poor times.

"Monsignor, they are only three days old. . . ." (73, 75)

By commenting on the careful crafting of lyrics and by presenting the collaborative efforts of poet and musician, the narrator emphasizes the relationship between artist and audience. The artist painstakingly creates a work of art, which then takes on a life of its own with the power to elicit the strong emotions of the audience. Likewise, the poetess carefully chooses her words to write a song that will move the reader to a heightened state of feeling and understanding.

Eliot pronouncedly employs this metapoetic technique as she punctuates the dramatic *The Spanish Gypsy* throughout with lyric poems. Early in the poem, musician (Pablo) and poet (Juan) sing odes to spring to mourn the transience of beauty and express hope for renewal (243-44, 247-48). The narrator describes the moving effect of Pablo's music in the *placa*:

Pablo awakes the viol and the bow—

The masculine bow that draws the woman's heart

From out the strings and makes them cry, yearn, plead,

Tremble, exult, with mystic union

Of joy acute and tender suffering.

To play the viol and discreetly mix

Alternate with the bow's keen biting tones

The throb responsive to the finger's touch,

Was rarest skill that Pablo half had caught

.....

The wingéd sounds exalt the thick-pressed crowd

With a new pulse in common, blending all

The gazing life into one larger soul

With dimly widened consciousness: as waves

In heightened movement tell of waves far off. (242)

The narrator describes the crowd gathering in a physical, emotional, and spiritual union that widens consciousness and raises community awareness. The music inspires Fedalma to dance rapturously a “dance religious” with “sweet community [informing] her limbs,” and the gathered crowd responds with collective amazement: “They hold their breath, and live by seeing her” (245-46). The narrator describes Fedalma’s dance as a song; she dances with the “grand chord /Of her harmoniously bodied soul” (246). Eliot the poet presents Pablo the musician who sings a song that unifies the audience and inspires Fedalma’s rapturous dance, all of which highlights the beauty of artistic expression and its power to inspire communal awe. Eliot also has characters directly comment on their experience with poetry/music. After Juan sings of his love for the virtuous Fedalma, Blasco remarks, “Faith, a good song, sung to a stirring tune / I like the words returning in a round; / It gives a sort of sense. Another such!” (231). Eliot creates a poem that points to its own power and invites the readers to follow the characters’ lead and express strong emotions and act for the common good. *The Spanish Gypsy* is thus a poem that regularly reminds readers to feel the music of the poem, adopt a

greater sensibility to the issues presented, and express emotions through acting out the message of the poem. The poem within a poem also reminds readers of the performing role of the poetess. As poets and musicians perform their music in the poetic scene, the poetess performs her music and demonstrates the emotional expression she hopes to elicit. There are many more examples of Eliot's inclusion of lyric poems within *The Spanish Gypsy*, and a full length study of these poems and their effects could provide valuable new insight into one of her most discussed poems.

These are but a few possible avenues for future Eliot studies that focus on her poetry. Such studies will allow readers a fuller understanding of the mindset and approach of the writer and of her work as a whole. Exploration of her poems in coordination with the work of other Victorian poets can also offer greater insight into the imagination and sensibility of one of the nineteenth-century's greatest writers and shed light on the poetess tradition and Victorian poetry as a whole. By excavating these works from their unvisited tombs, readers and scholars will restore life to art that has the power to stir pulses to generosity, "urge man's search to vaster issues," and "breathe beautiful order" into the growing life of all humanity (*Poems* 49).



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## ABSTRACT

### ART AND THE AWAKENING OF SYMPATHY: GEORGE ELIOT AS POETESS, PROPHET, AND MOTHER

by Wendy Williams, Ph.D., 2012  
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Modern critics discuss George Eliot's fiction at length but largely overlook her poetry, rejecting it as inferior verse or a departure from her artistic aim. When she began writing poetry in earnest, Eliot was already a famous, financially successful novelist. She wrote poetry despite the fact that it would not earn her significant financial gain or public support. Through her poetry, she propagated the value of sympathy and made social commentary on gender issues through a voice of moral and spiritual authority—that of a poetess. This work explores Eliot's poetry and her role as a poetess, prophet, and mother and offers a more complete picture of the author who appeared not only pseudonymously as a man but also as a poetess who used her femininity.

Eliot relied on a poetess tradition that was deeply invested in religion and feminine sympathy. These associations provided Eliot with an already-established platform that

allowed her to promote unorthodox religious views while appearing to uphold traditional, domestic values. By assuming the converging roles of poetess, sage, moral leader, and mother to the nation, Eliot commented on social issues, such as the unfairness of societally-prescribed gender roles and the commodification of women in the Victorian marriage market. She spoke out assertively in poems such as “Brother and Sister” and “How Lisa Loved the King” because poetry allowed for a measure of disguise behind feminine expression and within the confined quarters of verse form.

By adopting the poetess persona, which carried a sense of traditional religious authority, Eliot also subtly forwarded her belief in the sacredness of sympathetic relationships. For Eliot, sympathy, not dogma, led to a moral society, and the role of a poet was to heighten the readers’ awareness of the salvific power of compassion and guide them toward a better way of living. George Eliot advanced her religion of sympathy by placing herself within the gender-specific and spiritually motivated poetess tradition. With knowledge of the Bible and a firm understanding of society’s expectations for female authorship, Eliot consciously participated in a tradition of women poets who relied on feminine piety and poetry to help refine society through compassion and fellow-feeling.