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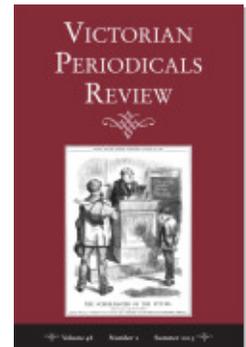
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## George Eliot, Poetess by Wendy S. Williams (review)

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competing species. Talairach-Vielmas begins the final chapter with a crucial rhetorical question once posed by Edith Nesbit: “Who wants to know about pumpkins until he has heard of Cinderella?” (142). Accordingly, Nesbit habitually courted children’s interest by merging fairies with prehistoric creatures, resulting in a discourse unmistakably evocative of contemporary popular science books.

Throughout, Talairach-Vielmas’s book offers the fruits of thorough research and nuanced interpretation. Arabella Buckley once asked her readers, “How are you to enter the fairy-land of science?” Today a reader would do well to begin with *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture*.

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Wendy S. Williams, *George Eliot, Poetess* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), pp. vii + 161, \$104.95/£60 cloth.

In *George Eliot, Poetess*, Wendy Williams contributes in a meaningful way to two neglected areas of George Eliot scholarship: her poetry and her “religious” intention. Williams defines the term “poetess” in a way that introduces and emphasizes the fact that Eliot regarded herself as having a sacred task. In her explanation of the poetess tradition, as well as in her insightful analyses of the poems, Williams builds a convincing case that Eliot thought of herself as a poetess in the traditional sense. By this, she means that Eliot consciously participated in a tradition of women poets who relied on feminine piety and devotional poetry to help refine society through the development of compassion and fellow-feeling. Williams takes both current and traditional scholarship into account and demonstrates how each poem upholds Eliot’s basic philosophical principles. She makes it clear that Eliot viewed poetry as an extension of, rather than a departure from, the artistic aims of her fiction. Williams shows that in her poetry—perhaps even more clearly than in her fiction—Eliot reveals her belief in sympathy as a replacement for orthodox religious views. In constructing her arguments, Williams also places a refreshing emphasis on George Eliot’s femininity. She portrays Eliot as being not only an intellectual, a writer of fiction, and a social commentator but also a woman who longed to nurture, participate in, and foster human relationships.

In the first chapter, Williams introduces the poetess tradition by exploring the relationship between religion, poetry, and gender in nineteenth-century Britain. She then introduces Eliot as a poetess who used her celebrity

to promote her poetry and fashion an image of herself as a living sage. She examines the poem "Erinna" to show how Eliot employed feminine conventions to situate herself in the tradition of great poetesses while also assuming masculine privilege and agency through the use of the epic tradition. In the second chapter, Williams focuses on Eliot's developing views of sympathy, demonstrating how she came to see herself as a prophet-poet whose mission was to teach others that fellow-feeling and sympathetic relations, rather than dogma, led to a moral and just society. Williams analyzes "Mid the Rich Store of Nature's Gifts to Man" and "O May I Join the Choir Invisible" to show how Eliot used a poetess stance to forward a secular religion of sympathy.

Chapter 3 discusses George Eliot's complex attitudes toward gender by showing how she conveyed progressive ideas on gender in her poetry while appearing feminine and traditional in her beliefs. Williams analyzes "Brother and Sister" and "How Lisa Loved the King" to show how Eliot's poetic heroines speak out against gender inequality and boldly assert themselves—in contrast to the female characters in Eliot's novels, who often suffer in unconventional settings and thrive in conventional ones. Williams also notes that Eliot addresses the need for sympathy by addressing issues of gender in some of her poetry.

In the fourth chapter, Williams investigates Eliot's use of two traditional themes associated with the poetess tradition: female community and motherhood. *Armigart* and "Agatha" reveal Eliot's use of these themes to communicate the sacred value of sympathy in society, and together they provide the basis for her conception of herself as a spiritual mother. Neither Eliot's status as a fallen woman nor her rejection of traditional Christianity hindered her from assuming a position as spiritual leader to the nation in her poetry.

The last chapter of *George Eliot, Poetess* reasserts the case for studying Eliot's verse through the lens of poetic stance. Williams mentions the need for scholarly attention to several areas related to Eliot's verse, such as overlapping themes in her poetry and novels, her poetic epigraphs, and her technique of including poems within poems. For Eliot, exercising sympathy for others was the highest achievement for humanity. She wrote her poetry, like her novels, to teach the value of such an achievement.

In this carefully researched text, Williams expands the boundaries of George Eliot scholarship in significant ways. Her nine-page bibliography is extremely well done and is a tribute to the depth and thoroughness of her scholarship. All who teach George Eliot, consider themselves Eliot scholars, or are simply interested in her work would benefit from this text.

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