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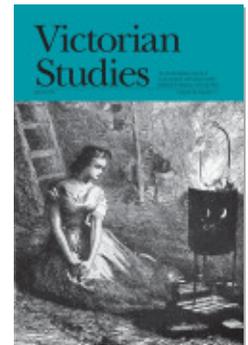
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*George Eliot, Poetess* by Wendy S. Williams (review)

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But bringing newly proposed forms to bear on the analysis of literature is, after all, another kind of New Formalism: an innovative sense of what kinds of concepts are appropriate for the analysis of literary form. And Levine shows her concepts, though they may not look in the first instance that intrinsic to literature (hierarchies and networks seem at least as appropriate to other fields, wholes to almost any field), to be particularly powerful in making visible aspects of complicated and capacious narratives when they are used. Levine teaches us, furthermore, to use them, in a poststructural awareness of the various possibilities their affordances entail. Whether using form to elucidate narrative or even showing awareness of formal affordance will amount to showing how literary formalism may analyze cultural forms and not just literary ones, such practices certainly stretch our notions of formal reading in a way that prepares us more for such a step.

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**George Eliot, *Poetess***, by Wendy S. Williams; pp. 161. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014, £65.00, \$104.95.

It would seem that George Eliot's poetry should have received abundant scholarly attention by now. It is metrically interesting, formally diverse, and thematically engaging. Yet while it shares themes with Eliot's novels and while some poetic lines give us a thinker we recognize from the fiction, Wendy S. Williams notes in this trailblazing study that many of Eliot's poems reveal less familiar aspects of her voice and intellect. The poetry's inherent attraction notwithstanding, *George Eliot, Poetess* is the first book-length account of it that we have. Sharing in "a quickening interest" in the poems within recent criticism, Williams persuasively explores how Eliot, already a novelist of stature when she launched her poetic career, understood the meaning of poetry-writing for her authorial persona (5). She argues that Eliot's poetry was *the* crucial vehicle both for her advocacy of sympathy as the foundation of ethical human relations and for her countercultural claims about feminine identity.

The first two chapters, working in comparatively familiar territory, discuss Eliot in relation to the figure of the nineteenth-century poetess and then examine her poetry's espousal of sympathy. Williams situates Eliot in "a tradition of women poets who relied on religion and feminine sympathy to claim authority" and scrutinizes her identity during the 1860s and 70s, when she was well known and when the scandal of her choice to live with George Henry Lewes had substantially faded (11). From the vantage of her fiction-writing, these decades are often treated as late chapters, culminations of earlier endeavors. But, Williams reminds us, as a poet Eliot's significant genesis lies here, and her focus on contemporary accounts of the author draws out interesting questions. How calculating, for instance, was Eliot's self-presentation at the sociable "Priory Sundays" that began as she launched her poetic career, and how did her persona there relate to her crafting of a poetic identity (24)? The reading of "Erinna" (1873-76)

with which Williams closes her first chapter argues that this poem focusing on an isolated young female creator connects to Eliot's discomfort about aging. Eliot, she shows, turned to poetry in her fifties in recognition of her own mortality.

That turn involved also the project in fellow feeling that interests Williams. The second chapter interprets "Mid the Rich Store of Nature's Gifts to Man" (1842) and "O May I Join the Choir Invisible" (1867) to argue that Eliot uses "the same religious language and doctrine" she rejected in repudiating Christianity to assert "the sacred value of sympathetic relationships" (39). So, for example, a term such as "soul" (in "Mid the Rich Store") or the notion of creativity bearing "the impress true of its peculiar seal"—that is, the idea of the made thing carrying the indelible mark of its human creator—carries a biblical resonance that signals the sanctity of human community (qtd. in Williams 56). Williams's readings are sound and intelligent. This is the section of the study that seems most indebted to Charles LaPorte's writing on Eliot's poetry, an influence Williams amply acknowledges.

The newest, most provocative discussion lies in the third and fourth chapters, which take up some fascinating poems scarcely considered in criticism. The third chapter, "Sexual Politics in Poetry," explores gender in the sonnet sequence "Brother and Sister" (1874) and marriage in the neglected poem "How Lisa Loved the King" (1869). The latter—an adaptation from the seventh day of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* that in Eliot's hands dilates eloquently on the interior life of a young woman experiencing first love—becomes a rich site for Williams's interests, and she perceptively shows how Eliot's insertion of passages at her poem's beginning and end politicizes both the marriage story it contains and Eliot's act of creation. This is an admirable choice of poem and an admirable reading, and a reader could be forgiven for wanting to hear more. Isn't it possible, for example, that the poem's eloquence in representing Lisa's experience signals more ambivalence about the meaning of her "heroic love"—as Williams fittingly designates it—than this reading allows, and that Eliot's employment of epic conventions is not as thoroughly ironic as this reading proposes (104)? Could it be that the poem communicates ambivalence about Lisa's position—her powerlessness—by raising a question about what power properly is? Or might Eliot's focus on Lisa's interiority be part of the seductiveness we are meant to resist—the kind of reification of feminine emotion that hinders our recognition of feminine subjection? All of this is mainly to say that, on seeing Williams's very good work with the poem, I wanted to read more.

As she focuses on motherhood in her fourth chapter, Williams valuably contextualizes her readings—of "The Legend of Jubal" (1870), *Armgart* (1870), and "Agatha" (1869)—with a return to Eliot's social life, considering her role as stepmother to Lewes's sons and her relationships with young admirers who addressed her "as a mother-idol," sometimes in erotic terms (111). The complexity shown to characterize Eliot's relationship to motherhood resonates in Williams's reading of "spiritual (rather than biological) motherhood" in "Agatha" (133). A discussion of "female community" in *Armgart* illuminates the poem's interest in how its disabled singer discovers modes of relating to other women and engages generatively with existing discussions of the poem (117).

A dominant mode of reading pursued here focuses on subtext. Poems seem to say one thing (usually in alignment with a dominant gender ideology) while on closer scrutiny they issue a challenge to convention. The approach often works well, and

Williams's introduction explains her reasons for choosing it. The book envisions an alignment between Eliot's careful self-presentation, as in the *Priory Sundays*, and her poetic argumentation. But on occasion one wishes that other tendencies of poems were granted more space—their irresolute and exploratory qualities, or the moments when they escape the poet's deliberate control. Yet I hesitate to complain. This study is essential for our understanding of Eliot, and Williams herself delineates key areas wanting further exploration in her final chapter, notably including "poetry within poetry"—that is, Eliot's commentary within poems on the act of poetic creation—and the significance of music in her poetics (143). It is an accomplished book that opens new aspects of Eliot to us.

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**Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture**, by Deborah Lutz; pp. xii + 244. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, £60.00, \$90.00.

Charles Dickens was devastated by the death of his wife's sister Mary Hogarth at the age of seventeen. Standing beside her deathbed, Dickens clipped a lock of Mary's hair and slipped a ring from her finger; he continued to wear that ring until his own death decades later. This story, which Deborah Lutz recounts in the third chapter of *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, offers us a hint of the intense attachment the Victorians felt toward objects associated with the dead. Those objects, what Lutz calls the "secular relics" of Victorian culture, are the focus of this book, which makes a case for nothing less than "a new philosophical approach to nineteenth-century materiality and death" (4, 169).

That new approach involves using thing theory to think about the matter of Victorian death culture, about the nineteenth century's longing to find something transcendent in both the body and the material items it touched during life. Lutz considers the Victorian reverence for preserved pieces of the body itself: hair jewelry, items handled by the dead, postmortem art, and even the spaces formerly occupied by the deceased. These remains, Lutz insists, constitute a uniquely fruitful subject for thing theory. After all, she suggests, "No other objects are, arguably, more infused with the special 'thingness' the material culturalist studies: with ideas, with interiority, with the metaphysical" (5). Such cherished matter has the potential, in Lutz's account, to transform our understanding of nineteenth-century material culture more generally. "One of the uses of bringing the history of relic culture into histories of collecting and of 'thing theory,'" Lutz writes, "is to ground secular materialism in the long history of the sacred object" (30); understanding the numinousness with which Victorians invested these relics offers us a chance to "shift our understanding of all objects during the period" (4). Central to Lutz's project, then, is identifying the sacred roots of Victorian relic culture, which Lutz locates in "the Catholic cult of saints" (4). But the history of nineteenth-century death culture, in Lutz's telling, traces a slow movement away