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Review of Felix Holt, The Radical

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**George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ed. William Baker and Kenneth Womack
(Broadview Literary Texts, 2000). ISBN 1 55111 228 0.**

William Baker and Kenneth Womack's *Felix Holt* is part of the relatively recent Broadview Literary Texts series, a Canadian-based series that seeks to publish recognized canonical texts alongside less well known texts from literary history. With that in mind, coverage in the Victorian period means we have editions of often taught novels by Dickens (*David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, and *Great Expectations*) and Charlotte Brontë (*Jane Eyre*) alongside texts that hitherto have almost never been read or taught widely – Margaret Oliphant's *Autobiography*, Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and an edition of poems by Augusta Webster. Given the remit of the series, it is perhaps not surprising that *Felix Holt* is the only text by George Eliot represented in the series so far, since it has tended to be, with the exception of *Romola*, her most underread novel. Having said that, there is no shortage of *Felix Holt* on the market, and Baker and Womack's edition joins two other recent, inexpensive paperbacks – A. G. van den Broek's 1997 Everyman paperback edition and Linda Mugglestone's 1995 Penguin Classics edition – so a revival may be under way for a new generation of readers, re-readers and students.

George Eliot's contemporary E. S. Dallas called *Felix Holt* 'a work of rare genius' in his 1866 *Times* review, included in the Baker/Womack edition, but literary critical opinion has generally not been so generous. Often, the novel has been regarded as flawed, owing to weakness in the characterization of Felix and an unconvincing realist plot, in particular. But as Baker and Womack suggest in their introduction, it is in the 'multiplicity of characters and the novel's intersection with a variety of themes' – in the many discourses that the novel addresses, to put it in academic-speak – that readers today will find interest. Most obviously, *Felix Holt* takes its place alongside other condition-of-England novels, for the way George Eliot looks back to the political contexts of the Reform Bill of 1832. Yet, the novel equally can be regarded in relation to writing about radicalism in the nineteenth century or to writing about gender. It is in the many directions a reader/teacher can take the novel that will ensure that this generally understudied work becomes more of a stand-by for readers of Victorian literature.

Baker and Womack's Broadview edition resembles van den Broek's Everyman edition the most. Like the Everyman series, the Broadview edition includes appendices intended to contextualize the novel, and provide a critical context for the reader. Both editions, naturally enough, include George Eliot's 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', published in the wake of the Second Reform Bill in 1868. The Broadview edition also includes a brief appendix dedicated to the legal plot of the novel, a good selection of contemporary critical responses to the novel (with large chunks of reviews, which I much prefer to brief excerpts), and, most interestingly, an excerpt from George Eliot's essay, 'The Natural History of German Life'. It is here, the editors tell us, that George Eliot 'explores the conservative political beliefs that will form the basis for her political analysis of Treby Magna', and the inclusion of part of this 1856 essay allows the reader to consider the politics in the novel more widely in terms of George Eliot's political thinking across the decades. The appendices, then, should be extremely helpful in helping readers locate the novel in relation to legal issues, reformist politics and radi-

calism, and George Eliot's own political positions. Furthermore, the notes to the novel are succinct and always helpful, but the fact that they appear as footnotes on the page may be the reason that the notes are less full than in other editions. This is not intended to be a criticism, especially since I tend to like notes on the page, and notes to the point; however, readers who prefer more extensive notes may find other editions more satisfying in this respect.

On the whole, Baker and Womack's edition is very fine and especially good for students and readers who are not familiar with the novel. My only real criticism of the edition is with regard to the editors' 'Introduction'. While they do a very good job of placing the novel in George Eliot's life and works, they do not spend much time critically evaluating the novel. I like Introductions that provide a more sustained interpretation of the novel, and I kept wishing that the editors would expand on the very interesting points they raise, whether about the political engagement of the novel or about characterization. As far as recent Introductions go, I prefer van den Broek's *Everyman*, for its more developed discussion of the novel. But having said that, I am a fan of the Broadview series generally, and this addition to the series is both welcome and one that I do not hesitate to recommend.

Mark W. Turner
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