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## 'The Mill on the Floss' and 'Silas Marner': New Casebooks

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**Nahem Yousaf and Andrew Maunder (eds.), *'The Mill on the Floss' and 'Silas Marner': New Casebooks* (Palgrave, 2002) pp. v + 233.  
Paperback ISBN 0 333 72805 X**

This collection of essays on two of George Eliot's most popular novels adds to the growing number of Casebooks produced by Palgrave. These are useful volumes, particularly for students, providing as they do a selection of recent critical perspectives. That said, I would have thought that *The Mill on the Floss* might have merited a volume all to itself; however the choice of essays contained herein provides some interesting links both within and across the two novels discussed.

In their Introduction, the editors comment that 'the essays reprinted in this *New Casebook* serve as a reminder of the dimensions of Eliot's achievements and the complex and often open-ended questions her work elicits', identifying Eliot as 'realist, scientist and sage' (5). As I mentioned above, the essays seem to have been chosen for the ways in which they link across the two novels, rather than because each exemplifies some particular aspect of Eliot studies, which means that the depth of Eliot criticism is not, perhaps, fully conveyed. However, there is much to enjoy in this volume.

The inclusion of some of Sally Shuttleworth's work on Eliot would probably be regarded as essential by most Eliot scholars, and her discussion of *Silas Marner* from *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* concludes the collection. Other selections exhibit a variety of interpretive strategies, with the balance in terms of numbers slightly in favour of *The Mill on the Floss*. Contributions range from J. Hillis Miller's deconstructionist reading of *The Mill on the Floss* to Jim Reilly's historicist examination of *Silas Marner*.

The collection opens with Susan Fraiman's feminist analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* in relation to the Western Bildungsroman, taken from her book *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*. Fraiman sets her reading within a discussion of earlier feminist essays on the novel, identifying as 'most useful' those responses which 'explore the complex tension between resignation and defiance in Eliot's work' (34). This points towards Fraiman's description of her own purpose to emphasize 'Eliot's engagement and struggle with the dominant paradigm' of the Bildungsroman (36). Fraiman posits a tension between the story of Tom as 'the coveted mode' of the Bildungsroman and Maggie as 'tugging' at it to 'loosen its moorings' (40). As Fraiman herself observes, such a reading 'puts *The Mill on the Floss* itself at odds with the usual novel of formation' (40). Fraiman's aim (in part) seems to be to reposition the novel as less a straightforward 'novel of development' than as one which problematizes the form while also deploying it. In constructing her argument, she suggests that the tension between Tom and Maggie's plots of development is part of a wider conflict between 'male' and 'female' models of development which the novel exposes: 'So Maggie and Lucy, excluded from a boy's roving, self-enlarging genre, are ushered into a diminishing space' (42). Fraiman's essay concludes by looking at the wider genre of the Bildungsroman before closing with a reinterpretation of Maggie and Tom's death: 'I suggest their simultaneous deaths mark a moment when their narratives collide for the last time, and now Tom's upward-bound Bildungsroman is fatally assimilated to Maggie's downward spiral' (50).

Development is also the theme of Joshua D. Esty's essay on 'Nationhood, Adulthood, and the Ruptures of Bildung: Arresting Development in *The Mill on the Floss*', in which Esty also reads the novel as questioning the genre of the Bildungsroman, though in a slightly different way, arguing that Eliot poses the question as to 'whether societies or individuals can be said to possess any kind of continuous identity over time' (101). Development of a different sort is the subject of the contributions of Peggy R. F. Johnstone and Terence Dawson, both of whom suggest that the novels can provide valuable illumination in understanding and interpreting Eliot's life. Johnstone is a psychoanalytic critic, and her essay on 'Narcissistic Rage in *The Mill on the Floss*' argues that 'Maggie's relationships with men can be read as her author's therapeutic confrontation with men in her own life' (140), while Dawson, in "'Light enough to trusten by": Structure and Experience in *Silas Marner*' focuses on Nancy Lammeter in a Jungian reading which also 'contends that Eliot's novels as a whole illuminate her life' (160). While this kind of biographical approach may be uneasy for some critics and scholars of Eliot's work, Dawson's focus on Nancy Lammeter provides some interesting comment on a character who is rarely the focus of Eliot criticism.

The other essays included here are by José Angel García Landa, on 'The Chains of Semiosis: Semiotics, Marxism and the Female Stereotypes in *The Mill on the Floss*', Mary Jacobus on 'Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*', and Jeff Nunokawa on 'The Miser's Two Bodies: *Silas Marner* and the Sexual Possibilities of the Commodity'. Approaches taken range from the focus of Landa and Jacobus on language and representation, to Nunokawa's tracing of Silas Marner's 'transformation' from 'solitary hoarder and masturbator to cleansed family man and consumer' (183).

A volume such as this cannot hope to encompass the entire range of approaches to such a complex writer as George Eliot, and so my reservation that the depth of Eliot studies is not conveyed is probably a little unfair. In adopting a strategy which comes across, at least to this reader, as picking up on *particular* elements in Eliot criticism, the editors have perhaps sought to give the volume a clear structure and sense of 'development' itself and it works perfectly well. The stated aim of the *New Casebooks*, is, after all, 'to reveal some of the ways in which contemporary criticism has changed our understanding of commonly studied texts and writers, and, indeed, of the nature of criticism itself' (ix), and the editors themselves point out that the intention of this volume is to 'whet the reader's appetite' (6) rather than to provide a comprehensive overview of Eliot criticism, and to act as a companion volume to R. P. Draper's earlier *Casebook*. In its mix of theoretical readings and other, socio-political approaches, this *New Casebook* fulfils that task.

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