

2015

Review of Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance

Patricia Duncker

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Duncker, Patricia, "Review of Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance" (2015). *The George Eliot Review*. 678.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ger/678>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The George Eliot Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Patricia Duncker, *Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 292. ISBN 978 1 4088 6052 6.

George Eliot's afterlife in adaptations of and sequels to her works is thin compared to those of such contemporaries as Dickens and the Brontës, and similarly the number of novels in which she appears as a character is meagre. True, as early as 1881 the characterization of Theresa in *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* was inspired by the friendship of its author, William Hale White, with Marian Evans in the 1850s, when both lived in publisher John Chapman's house at 142 Strand. Theresa is an idealized character, but recall White's corrective to *George Eliot's Life ... by her husband J. W. Cross*, in which he laments the absence of salt and spice in the Marian Evans that Cross is carefully recreating. Patricia Duncker, offering George Eliot as the Sibyl in *Sophie and the Sibyl: A Victorian Romance*, the latest novel to depict her, goes rather for salt and vinegar.

Between White and Duncker there has been a smattering of fictional representations of George Eliot. Some, like J. E. Buckrose's *Silhouette of Mary Ann* (1931) and Elfrida Vipont's *Towards a High Attic: The Early Life of George Eliot* (1970), concentrate on the young Marian Evans, up to the point at which she enters into the relationship with Lewes and becomes George Eliot and a published author. Others focus on the relationship with John Cross, which is more susceptible to psychologizing and less to anxious moralizing than that with Lewes. In *Johnnie Cross* (1983), Terence de Vere White presents an infantilized Cross, overwhelmed by his bride's sexual demands. In one of the episodes of *The Puttermesser Papers* (1997), Cynthia Ozick allows her heroine Ruth Puttermesser a romance with a painter, a copyist, in which she channels George Eliot and he Cross: the copyist insists that the key emotional dynamic was Cross's infatuation with Lewes, triangulated through George Eliot. Deborah Weisgall in *The World Before Her* (2008) makes Cross a staid but devoted businessman, and George Eliot more wily and less dependent than in most accounts, fictional or otherwise. Most recently, Robert Muscutt in *Heathen and Outcast: Scenes in the Life of George Eliot* (2011) employs the novelist's disciple Edith Simcox as presiding narrator, calling on other voices to show a feisty Mary Ann, making central her relationship with brother Isaac (here relentlessly rigid, domineering, vindictive and materialistic).

Engagingly, Duncker tells us that her starting point for the novel was the coincidence of her family name with that of one of George Eliot's German publishers, Duncker Verlag of Berlin. This house published the first German translation of *Adam Bede*, and was successful in the negotiation that underpins the action of *Sophie and the Sibyl*, about rights to the German translation of *Middlemarch*. (Although mention is made in the novel of Duncker Verlag's interest in both *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, the firm secured neither.)

The novel has a factual basis without pretence to literal historical accuracy. The action begins in Germany during the serialization of *Middlemarch* in 1871, continuing through to George Eliot's death and funeral in December 1880. Here we have imagined action consistent with documented events. In fact, the trips to Germany on which Duncker principally draws were to Berlin in 1870, when George Eliot and George Lewes were much feted, by the American ambassador among others, rolled in with visits to Homburg and Stuttgart in 1872. Duncker plays fair. The three epigraphs to *Sophie and the Sibyl*, two actual quotations and one from the fictional present day narrator, signal the morphing of fact into fiction. There are plenty

of similar playful touches, in the chapter titles for example, which imitate wordy eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors in a general way, and sometimes quite specifically, as in 'CHAPTER FOUR in which the Story pauses a little' so that the present day narrator can take the floor to rail against the realism celebrated in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede*. This 'sceptical young woman' early on distinguishes her enterprise from that of John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1967) by her feminist commitment, though acknowledging his pioneering Neo-Victorian method. Like Fowles's narrator, she steps in from time to time in the interests, as she says, of 'rewriting history as fiction'.

As *Sophie and the Sibyl* opens, Wolfgang, the elder Duncker, entrusts the *Middlemarch* negotiations to his much younger brother, twenty-three year-old Max, who is something of a playboy. George Eliot is presented largely through Max's eyes, and his reaction on meeting her is one shared by many in her lifetime, and indeed, in the same words, by others in the novel: 'The lady is old. The lady is ugly. The lady has wonderful eyes.' But like Henry James, he finds himself 'literally in love with this great horse-faced blue-stocking', declaring his feelings in a scene that resonates with F. W. H. Myers' famous account of his walk with George Eliot in Cambridge 'on an evening of rainy May' 1873, and ends Part One of the novel.

Max is concurrently expected to make good an implicit contract between the families that he should marry Sophie, Countess von Hahn – the titular Sophie, who at seventeen loves all George Eliot's novels and is invested in *Middlemarch*. There is an amusing passage in which she laments 'it is dreadful to wait for the next book. I cannot imagine how *Middlemarch* will end. Or how she will contrive the marriage between Lydgate and Dorothea'. Sophie never reads the ending, but lives out possibilities that she alleges George Eliot shamefully denies to her heroines. She falls out of love with the Sibyl when George Eliot responds indirectly to a letter in which Sophie asks for advice about marriage: this after an episode of fiction into fiction, when George Eliot and Max connive to return to Sophie a family necklace she has pawned in order to get a stake to gamble. When Sophie realizes later that her action has contributed to the opening of *Daniel Deronda*, she is enraged, and later still, after she has been instrumental in a major archaeological discovery mainly attributed to Max, she bursts in on George Eliot in The Priory, accusing her of bad faith in denying opportunities to her characters. Sophie resents her life being appropriated for George Eliot's art, and her career re-writes the Gwendolen Harleth character. She wins: her gambling is with intent, to get funds to buy horses, and in the end she is in her own right a noted breeder and trainer of racehorses. Other resonances include her singing at a drawing-room concert to great applause, boldly declaring her love for Max who is unable to bring himself to propose.

In addition, Sophie is able to see what Max cannot, that for all George Eliot's power as a mentor and confessor, she is needy, fearful for her future in the event of Lewes's death. More, she sees that the older woman is predatory, not only in appropriating real life incidents, but also in ensnaring younger people, especially men. At a climax, Max and Sophie, now married with a small son, come into literal collision with Mr and Mrs John Cross on their honeymoon in Venice in June 1880, with Max helping to rescue Cross after his leap into the Grand Canal, and assisting the shocked Sibyl to make necessary arrangements.

Along the way there are nice conceits like having Julius Klesmer appear as a character, with all the biographical detail of his namesake in *Daniel Deronda*, and the addition of his conducting a performance of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* in Stuttgart attended by Eliot and Lewes. Coded into this episode is George Eliot's support for the ideas of Darwin and Wagner,

despite her real life reservations about 'the Music of the future': she is allowed intellectual integrity even though her moral and emotional attributes are questioned. Hans Meyrick also breaks out of *Deronda*, having acquired some of the attributes of *Middlemarch's* Naumann.

Patricia Duncker is a formidable combination of academic and novelist, and no stranger to fictional representations of authors and readers. Her first novel, *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), centred on a Cambridge postgraduate working on an imaginary French novelist Paul Michel, who turns out to have had a correspondence amounting to a declaration of love with the philosopher Michel Foucault. In other of her work, in both fiction and criticism, Duncker continues this poststructuralist play with identity in the service of setting up some penetrating questions about the distinction between an author and her works, and the obsessions of readers.

Sophie and the Sibyl is written out of immersion both in George Eliot's writings (letters and journals as well as fiction), and in writings about her. In an 'Afterword', Duncker credits Edith Simcox's journal as her most important documentary source, for its testimony to Simcox's passionate bond 'both with Marian Evans Lewes and with the mind of George Eliot'—an important distinction that is central to the achievement of this novel. Duncker is interested in the various distinctions among the narrating presences of George Eliot's writings; 'George Eliot', the brand managed by George Lewes and Marian Evans Lewes; and the woman who died Mary Ann Cross, though travelling under a number of names in her lifetime.

Though it requires of me an imaginative leap, I think the novel is accessible to readers not so familiar with this material as Patricia Duncker, though especially piquant for those who are. That said, a dominant consideration for devotees of an author in reading any interpretation, whether nominally factual or avowedly fictional, is that their author be treated with respect and not violated. There will be some for whom the reading of George Eliot proposed in this novel, dwelling on the predatory aspects of both her artistic power and her emotional needs, will be inherently offensive. Stay away!

Sophie and the Sibyl, like Rebecca Mead's *The Road to Middlemarch* (2014), is a tribute to George Eliot. Mead's book explicitly chronicles her acquaintance with George Eliot's work, providing considerable illumination of aspects of *Middlemarch* without making the kinds of distinction that are among the drivers of Patricia Duncker's boldly conceived, eminently readable, and at times startlingly confronting novel.

Margaret Harris
University of Sydney