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The Cambridge Introduction to
George Eliot

As the author of *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, George Eliot was one of the most admired novelists of the Victorian period, and she remains a central figure in the literary canon today. She was the first woman to write the kind of political and philosophical fiction that had previously been a male preserve, combining rigorous intellectual ideas with a sensitive understanding of human relationships and making her one of the most important writers of the nineteenth century. This innovative introduction provides students with the religious, political, scientific and cultural contexts that they need to understand and appreciate her novels, stories, poetry and critical essays. Nancy Henry also traces the reception of her work to the present, surveying a range of critical and theoretical responses. Each novel is discussed in a separate section, making this the most comprehensive short introduction available to this important author.

Nancy Henry is Associate Professor of English at the State University of New York at Binghamton. She is the author of, among other books, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2002; paperback edition, 2006).

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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

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In Memoriam
George Brite Merchant (1920–2002)
Nancy Brite Merchant Henry (1929–2003)
Bitsy (1988–2005)

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Preface

Two of George Eliot's fictional heroines fantasize about journeying to see a famous writer. Unhappy Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* harbors a pathetic dream: "she would go to some great man – Walter Scott, perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her" (*Mill*, IV:3). Equally wretched Romola leaves her husband with the intention of visiting "the most learned woman in the world, Cassandra Fedele, at Venice" to ask her advice about how she can learn to support herself (*R*, II:36). Perhaps the narrator of *Adam Bede* offers the explanation for why neither Maggie nor Romola realizes her fantasy: "if you would maintain the slightest belief in human heroism, you must never make a pilgrimage to see the hero" (*AB*, II:17).

George Eliot (Marian Evans Lewes) was a literary hero to many during her life and to subsequent generations of readers and writers. In historical memory, she is as compelling and charismatic a figure as she was in life. Her astonishing mind led men and women to fall in love with her even before she began to write fiction. Some fell in love with her through reading her fiction. In the final years of her life, many came to pay tribute at the carefully orchestrated afternoon salons in her London home, the Priory. After her death, some of the pilgrims became disillusioned, and her reputation suffered.

It is not surprising that 150 years since she published her first story, her fiction too has attracted acolytes and detractors, both with a peculiar intensity that reflects the ambivalent feelings of subsequent generations toward the Victorian age, which Eliot so powerfully represents. The realism that was praised in the mid nineteenth century for extending sympathy to common, unheroic people was often criticized at the end of the twentieth century for its essentially middle-class perspective. Such responses suggest that how we read George Eliot's writing has everything to do with our own historical context, but to appreciate her works properly, we need to know something about their contexts.

This book provides an introduction to Eliot's life, reading and historical milieu, contexts that are intimately related: reading was part of her life and her life is part of history. As her much-admired contemporary Elizabeth Barrett

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Browning wrote in her verse novel, *Aurora Leigh* (1856): "The world of books is still the world" (Bk. 1, line 808). Interpretations of the individual works offered here may suggest some reasons why today's readers will find relevance to their world in Eliot's characters, her plots and the hard philosophical and moral questions they raise. The contexts make the texts more accessible so that readers may discover the intellectual and moral challenges – as well as the pleasures – of reading them.

Eliot's books remain popular, or perhaps more accurately, "canonical," generating editions, companions, and books and articles from a wide variety of critical perspectives. The proliferation of interpretations and scholarship is a testament to the richness – and to some extent the difficulty – of her writing. Scholarship adds to our knowledge, and criticism provokes our thinking; both are immensely helpful in exploring the complexities of Eliot's essays, novels, and poetry. The most compelling experience of her writing, however, will be personal, and will follow only from close, engaged, and informed reading.

Eliot's works speak to universal human experiences of the young and old: to misunderstood children, like Maggie Tulliver; to anyone who has lived with a secret, like Mrs Transome; to idealists, like Dorothea Brooke, who persist in bad choices with the best of intentions; to ambitious professionals like Tertius Lydgate, who become weighted down with petty politics and domestic cares; to women trapped in bad marriages like Romola and Gwendolen; or to those who have been adopted and wonder about their parentage like Daniel Deronda. Eliot's subtle, psychological portraits of these and many other characters account for the power her fiction still has today.

Just as Eliot's fiction showed – boldly for her time – that ordinary people could be the heroes and heroines of novels, so she knew that the great writer she had become, attracting pilgrims in want of advice, was really not a hero at all, but a fallible human being. The novelist Anne Thackeray Ritchie reported Eliot as asking, "if she hadn't been human with feelings and failings like other people, how could she have written her books?"* Perhaps this is why heroes should not be visited. Eliot knew that the best place to search for the wisdom of great writers was their writings.

* Quoted in Gordon Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 542.

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Abbreviations

References to GE's works will be to volume and chapter numbers and the titles will be abbreviated as follows:

AB	*Adam Bede*. Ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: World's Classics, 1996).
BJ	"Brother Jacob." *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*. Ed. Helen Small (Oxford: World's Classics, 1999).
DD	*Daniel Deronda*. Ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988).
FH	*Felix Holt*. Ed. Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988).
GEL	*The George Eliot Letters*. Ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–5, 1978).
LV	"The Lifted Veil." *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*. Ed. Helen Small (Oxford: World's Classics, 1999).
Mill	*The Mill on the Floss*. Ed. Gordon Haight (Oxford: World's Classics, 1981).
MM	*Middlemarch*. Ed. David Carroll (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988).
Poetry	*The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*. Ed. Antonie Gerard van den Broek (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005).
R	*Romola*. Ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: World's Classics, 1994).
Scenes	*Scenes of Clerical Life*. Ed. Tomas A. Noble (Oxford: World's Classics, 1988).
SCW	George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*. Ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).
SEPW	*Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*. Eds. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (New York: Penguin, 1990).
SM	*Silas Marner*. Ed. Terence Cave (Oxford: World's Classics, 1996).
TS	*Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. Ed. Nancy Henry (London: Pickering and Chatto, and Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994).

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