

REVIEWS

***Dark Smiles: Race and Desire in George Eliot*, by Alicia Carroll. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003. Xvii +179, 4 illustrations. ISBN 0-8214-1441-0. \$39.95 (cloth).**

I confess I have never liked George Eliot very much. Perhaps that is because I have always felt, along with D.A. Miller, that her work is “no substantial challenge to the way things are” (qtd. in Carroll 122). Her writing has always seemed to me so blisteringly conservative and so completely punishing towards women. Perhaps for these reasons, I rarely teach Eliot in my survey classes.

A good Victorianist is not supposed to admit to such feelings about Eliot. But I admit to them in order to underline how satisfying and intriguing I found Alicia Carroll’s *Dark Smiles*. It is a book that has me yearning both to read and to teach Eliot, and this, I think, is among the best functions literary criticism.

Carroll places her work squarely in the longstanding and productive tradition of Victorianist feminist criticism. Building on the work Gilbert and Gubar, Nancy Armstrong, Susan Meyer, Anita Levy, Gillian Beer, Deirdre David, and others, Carroll cites the dual truisms of Victorian fiction generally and of women’s writing of the period in particular: the difficulty in creating sexually-desiring women characters, what Carroll calls “desirous female subjectivity,” along with the “enormous pressure to convert” the desire of these characters into “productive domesticity” (18). What Carroll argues is that “pleasure,” particularly the “‘infiltrate[s]’ the plots of English provincial life through Otherness” in the work of George Eliot (138). Carroll’s readings of Eliot do not attempt to refute the traditional view of Eliot as conservative; she offers neither a simplistic celebration of Eliot “as progressive or enlightened” nor a “chiding” of Eliot as “reifying a colonizing, hegemonic authority” (3). Instead, her discussion and nuanced readings focus on Eliot’s “instability,” on her “concessions to and divergences from conventional stereotypes of desirous Others” as she creates characters who “resist ‘stable’ or static meanings” (3). In Carroll’s well-researched discussions of *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Spanish Gypsy*, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda*, she builds thoughtfully and generously on the wealth of existing Eliot criticism while also placing Eliot’s work within the context of her artistic contemporaries such as painter Henriette Browne and photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, all of which enables Carroll to carve out a new and compelling vision of George Eliot.

In discussions of *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Spanish Gypsy*, Carroll focuses on how Eliot uses “race and a subtle Orientalism as a metaphor” (41) for

bondage and female domestic oppression. Carroll explores Eliot's use of the gendered discourse of "gypsy lore" (35), particularly the ways in which the Gypsy woman was imagined as "overtly sensual, earthy, and sexually corrupt" (33). This "lore" thus could function as a "fluid site within which Eliot might narrate the experience of European women whom she figures as prisoners in the home" (30). Carroll's close attention to the "subtleties, elisions, and [the text's] critique of popular colonialist representations" (60) allows her to take note of how Maggie's encounter with the gypsies is shaped by her "cultural baggage" (which structures and distorts her encounter with them) but also to argue that Eliot is using this encounter to "lampoon the colonial plot" and to "lampoo[n] representations of sexualized colonialist hysteria" (43).

In her discussion of *The Spanish Gypsy*, Carroll similarly complicates the traditional reading of the heroine's rejection of marriage and love for political and spiritual vocation by focusing on the poem's colonial narrative. Her work here focuses on Eliot's interest in representations of the Madonna and of maternity and what she notices as an "erotics of maternal touch" (57) in the poem. Ultimately, Carroll argues, Eliot's "Gypsy queen rewrites Orientalist images of penetration and mastery to produce a plot of maternal pleasure which, while problematic in itself, subverts the phallogentric plots of both colonialism and domestic ideology" (60).

Carroll's discussion of *Felix Holt* does not dispute the traditional reading of the novel as "conservative": "the willful heroine ends up married, chastened and 'punished' at the novel's end" (67-8). But this subtle and interesting chapter investigates the ways in which *Felix Holt* "connects the problems of blood and race" (67) and the ways in which the "politics of race and class infiltrate the politics of Victorian national reform" (67). Carroll argues that Eliot indicts "Victorian Englishness itself [. . .] stressing the generational contamination of English culture and English family values from within English culture itself" (78).

While the "strangely foreign English man" (91) of *Felix Holt*, Harold Transome, is dismissed, Carroll argues that *Middlemarch* more radically pursues what she call the "miscegenational romance plot" (67). In her discussion, Carroll focuses on Ladislav's otherness, the "rumor" which ultimately becomes the "fact" of his Jewishness. Dorothea's marriage to Will, in defiance of the male figures of authority, her dead husband, and of the "sexual and political confines of provincial English life" (106) represents Eliot's grandest rebellion:

Eliot devalues the world of Englishness and engages with the outsider [. . .] *Middlemarch* refuses to banish Other characters or avoid miscegenation to preserve and affirm a paradigm of Englishness that finds its expression in the uneasy domesticity and expulsions of erotic desire that mark the endings of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, or *Oliver Twist*. (98).

Addressing a tradition in Eliot criticism, Carroll argues that Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw should no longer be seen as a "compromise" but as a "problematic embrace of both Otherness and the erotic" (139).

Finally, Carroll considers *Daniel Deronda*, focusing in particular on how the text reworks *Othello*, Rossini's opera *Otello*, and "The History of Prince Camaralzaman and Queen Budoor," from the popular *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Carroll reads Eliot's allusions and revisions of these text to explore "ethnicity's role in the control and regulation of sexual passion in the novel" and the "politically delicate questions of racial and ethnic purity" (121). She argues that the narrative's "chaste reconciliation of marriage and vocation" (139), so often disappointing to readers, should be seen within the context of the more nuanced and disruptive strain of exotic and erotic difference that runs throughout the novel.

If I have any qualm at all with this well written book, it is that in carving out this space for Eliot, Carroll sometimes allows what she calls the "Victorian *status quo*" to become something of a static straw man. Carroll is certainly on target when she argues that Eliot "presents a complex challenge to the readings of Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, both of whom see the fiction of the Victorian period [. . .] as unreflectingly supportive of the values of empire" (20). Such a broad critique of Said and Spivak, is, I think, no longer necessary, as various critics have come to complicate the broad generalisations and connotations that were necessary for the time and place of Said's and Spivak's important critical interventions. But Carroll's book does not overreach, and the delicacy of her discussions of Eliot are far more central to her project than any attempt to stake unwieldy claims in the broader field.

In the end, *Dark Smiles* offers Victorianists a comprehensive and compelling argument for the importance of race in Eliot.

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***Literature, Science, Psychoanalysis, 1830-1970: Essays in Honour of Gillian Beer.* Edited by Small, Helen and Trudi Tate. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 264 p, 4 illustrations. ISBN 0-19-926667-0. \$74.00 (hardback).**

Beautifully produced and carefully edited, this volume honours Dame Gillian Beer's contributions to the intersecting fields of literature, science, and psychoanalysis. It does so very handily, with essays that equally demonstrate and respond to the formative impact of her work these past few decades. Although its contributors primarily hail from literary studies and the history of science, their articles all seek to emulate the remarkably expansive and rigorous gaze that Beer has cast between the disciplines, both in her more recent work on psychoanalysis and Lewis Carroll