

CLOSED STACKS

A FEMINIST REVALUATION OF SYMPATHY IN THREE NOVELS
OF GEORGE ELIOT: *ROMOLA*, *FELIX HOLT*, AND *MIDDLEMARCH*.

A Dissertation

submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Malaya

by

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July 1996

Perpustakaan Universiti Malaya



A506433194

Dimikrofiskan pada..... 28.12.99
No. Mikrofis..... 14369
Jumlah Mikrofis..... 3

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SYNOPSIS

George Eliot's professed intention as a writer to enlarge the sympathies of human beings is regarded in a number of feminist commentaries as conflicting with feminist ideology and aims. A review of selected feminist readings of Eliot's fiction reveals that feminist readers tend to associate the representation of sympathy with the diminishment of Eliot's female protagonists. This negative view of sympathy partly stems from how it is conceived by Eliot. Sympathy is ideally an inherent virtue in women; an essentialist conception that for many feminist critics alarmingly echoes patriarchal ideas of woman's nature. However, radical feminist thought offers a different understanding of sympathy and accompanying qualities such as self-doubt, sensitivity to others, and self-transcending willingness to reconcile conflicting human needs. These qualities, traditionally designated feminine and effectively rendered powerless and inferior in the patriarchal milieu, are accorded revolutionary significance, revalued, as the foundation-stones on which radical feminists endeavour to build an alternative morality to that of patriarchy. The critical relevance of revaluation, starting from and ratifying the author's intention, is then assessed in the context of the dominant current critical approach, postmodernism.

Romola illustrates the revolutionary significance of sympathy through the juxtaposition of the history (herstory?)

of the eponymous heroine and the experiences of the men in her life. Romola, seeming to vacillate between feminist self-assertion and reactionary self-sacrifice, is found to be consistently revolutionary as her steadfastness to the values of caring and consideration for others places her in opposition to the alienating, annihilating values of her patriarchal environment.

The popular perception of *Felix Holt* as George Eliot's political novel is refuted in favour of moral interpretations of the radicalism depicted in the novel and the parallel postulated between this moral radicalism and Eliot's radical feminist vision. This reading discloses the unity of the novel beneath the putative dichotomy and artistic inequality of its two strands of narrative. The deconstructive criticism and the rejection of patriarchal customs and mores for a life of sympathy that is conveyed in Felix's and Esther's stories is complemented by the depiction of patriarchal baseness, deceptiveness, and oppression in Mrs. Transome's tragedy.

Attitudes to and expectations of marriage expressed in *Middlemarch* are taken as indicators of the characters' moral and feminist stature. Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon and Lydgate's to Rosamond are discussed to explore the dangers of the illusions fostered by patriarchal values and stereotypes as well as the conflict between patriarchal and feminine values within and between individuals. Dorothea's second marriage to Ladislav is read as an affirmation of her feminine values while another aspect to Lydgate's tragic end is put forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Hutang emas boleh dibayar

Hutang budi dibawa mati

(Debts of gold may be paid

Debts of gratitude remain debts till death)

- from a traditional Malay poem

Inadequate but heartfelt thanks must go to:

- Dr. Tang Soo Ping, for her patience with and trust in me, and for her incisive comments and suggestions which have been invaluable to me in the production of this dissertation,
- mum and dad, for being supportive of my journey down this "road less travelled",
- Nyun Mien, Sharon, Shals, Agnes, and Kat for intellectual companionship and unstinting practical and moral support,
- Nyun Sin for help with the computer.

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A NOTE ON THE TEXTS

The page references to the novels refer to the Penguin editions.

References to other writings by George Eliot are cited as follows:

Letters ***The George Eliot Letters Vols. 1-8.*** Ed. Haight, Gordon S. 1954-6. London: Oxford University Press.

Essays ***Essays of George Eliot.*** Ed. Pinney, Thomas. 1963. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.