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MORE MARRIAGE QUESTIONS: GEORGE HENRY LEWES AND GEORGE ELIOT[1]

By Beverley Park Rilett

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'[A]ll meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation',
George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*

The Romantic Beginning

Marian Evans, whom I will call George Eliot for consistency, met George Henry Lewes in 1851 at the *Westminster Review*, where Eliot was the managing editor and Lewes a frequent contributor. This was not love at first sight but a connection that grew over time, as Eliot gradually revised her poor first impressions of both Lewes's writing and character. Despite his existing marriage and family, their intellectual connection deepened into friendship – and then love.

In July of 1854, Eliot decided to join Lewes on a research trip to Germany. He was writing a biography on Goethe and could benefit from her superior German translation skills. She confided in only two people: her co-editor on the *Westminster Review*, John Chapman, and her friend Charles Bray (*GEL* 2: 178). Both men were freethinkers known to have extramarital affairs and she likely believed they would be more understanding than her female friends. Bray, however, 'pressed upon her for the sake of herself and friends that she should separate herself from Lewes' (*GEL* 8: 128). Nevertheless, she persisted.

Though Lewes and his wife Agnes had what we might now call an 'open marriage,' Eliot's decision – as an unmarried woman – to travel unchaperoned with a married man violated Victorian social codes. The resulting scandal exceeded what either Eliot or Lewes might have anticipated. Within two months, vicious gossip was circulating through London, exemplified by a former friend's letter:

> Have you heard of two blackguard literary fellows, Lewes and Thornton Hunt? They seem to have used wives on the ancient Briton principle of having them in common: now blackguard Lewes has bolted with a ---- and is living in Germany with her […]. I will not any further lift the mantle and display the filthy contaminations of these hideous satyrs and smirking moralists […] stink pots of humanity. (*GEL* 2: 175–76)[2]

By October 1854, perhaps influenced by this fierce social rejection, Lewes decided to leave Agnes permanently. As Eliot explained to Bray, 'Circumstances, with which I am not concerned, and which have arisen since he left England, have led him to determine on a separation from Mrs. Lewes' (*GEL* 2: 178). In March, Lewes returned home to finalize arrangements for Agnes and their six children, leaving Eliot in Dover for five weeks, but by May 1855, Lewes and Eliot began their life together in London, now united against society's censure.

Resigned to Loss of Friends, Family, and Social Life

Despite any doubts George Eliot might have had about living 'in sin' with Lewes, she persistently justified her decision and resolved to accept the painful consequences. When her dear friend Cara Bray stopped writing and inviting her for visits, Eliot wrote to her after fourteen months, emphasizing the seriousness of her commitment to Lewes: 'Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire nor could live for practically' (*GEL* 2: 214). Though she declared that Sara, Cara, and her sister Chrissey were 'tied to [her] heart by a cord which can never be broken,' she defended her choice, believing they were 'unacquainted with Mr. Lewes's real character' (*GEL* 2: 182). Although Cara eventually resumed correspondence, their friendship cooled significantly, and it was five years before the three friends were reunited in person. The situation with Eliot's family proved even worse – her brother Isaac cut all ties upon learning of the relationship and urged their sisters Fanny and Chrissey to do the same. This painful estrangement later found echoes in *The Mill on the Floss*, where Maggie Tulliver faces similar rejection by her beloved brother Tom, after her supposed indiscretion with Stephen Guest.

Eliot's previously active social life contracted dramatically when she began living with Lewes in 1855. She seldom went out and was largely isolated from her previous social circles, venturing into town only three times and to the theater once in eighteen months, always with Lewes (Haight 210). Her visits to others ceased, and few friends visited her. In a moment of uncharacteristic 'bitterness', she lamented that she would have 'no friends again, only acquaintances' (Haight 299). While Eliot faced social ostracism as Lewes's mistress, he was accepted back into his former circle of friends. Nevertheless, she continued to emphasize the sacredness of their love and the worthiness of her sacrifice.

The Perfect Partner?

Most biographers contend that George Henry Lewes was an ideal partner, citing abundant evidence, including the couple's loving references to each other in correspondence, Eliot's tender manuscript dedications, and

contemporary accounts of their harmonious relationship. Their twenty-four years together appears exemplary, with Lewes constantly supporting Eliot's career by encouraging her writing, managing her public identity, handling her business affairs, and creating an environment where she could flourish. Yet, while acknowledging these positive aspects, we should not shy away from examining some concerning patterns. A closer look at Lewes's protective behaviours, including his control of her finances, correspondence, and social interactions, reveals parallels with the complex, difficult marriages Eliot herself depicted in her fiction, which I have elsewhere described as her 'master narrative' – the overarching pattern that appears consistently throughout her works where difficult marital relationships serve as a lens for examining broader themes of power, autonomy, and emotional fulfillment (Rilett 2016, 18).[3]

Encouraging her Fiction Writing

Under Lewes's encouragement, Marian Evans discovered her calling as a novelist. Though she had 'always' contemplated fiction writing, as she notes in 'How I Came to Write Fiction', Lewes initially expressed 'considerable doubts' about her ability (*GEL* 2: 406–7). Their accounts of this pivotal moment reveal different perspectives: Eliot emphasizes overcoming doubt and finding unexpected success, while Lewes stresses their dire poverty in 1856 – living in one room, barely able to afford food – and his urging her to try fiction for its better pay than journalism (Haight 218). When she produced the touching story of 'Amos Barton,' Lewes was both delighted and surprised, validating what he saw as his crucial role in launching her new career.

Having contributed to *Blackwood's Magazine*, Lewes used his connections to introduce her to publisher John Blackwood, describing a clerical friend whose 'extremely fragile temperament' prevented self-representation. Lewes portrayed 'him' as having a 'shy, shrinking, ambitious nature' too sensitive for direct criticism, and boasted about his own critical role: 'He (very judiciously!) looks up to my critical opinion as oracular; but in spite of confidence in me is so diffident of himself, that I had to bully him into acquiescence with the fact that I had discovered a genius. I cackle over my hatched chick; and so may you' (*GEL* 2: 295). In a subsequent letter to Blackwood expressing similar warnings about his protégé's sensitivity, Lewes's postscript reveals his awareness of overstepping: '*Don't allude to this hint of mine*. He wouldn't like my interfering' (*GEL* 2: 364, emphasis original).

Lewes's casual reference to 'bullying' his protégé strikes me as a red flag and suggests that this early pattern of control – presented as protection – would define their professional relationship. Lewes managed her finances,

negotiated her contracts, and dictated her writing schedule, with consequences both beneficial and problematic.

Preserving Her Anonymity

For nearly three years (September 1856 to June 1859), George Eliot lived a double life, concealing both her identity and her new career in fiction writing. While the mystery surrounding the authorship of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* sparked lively debate in literary circles and boosted sales, it exacted a personal toll. Eliot found herself dodging questions and misleading friends, while Lewes simply lied when confronted. Praise from literary celebrity Charles Dickens, who suspected a female author, only intensified her discomfort. She described her situation as 'the iron mask of my incognito' (*GEL* 2: 424), and despite the critical and popular success of *Adam Bede*, Lewes observed that she was 'almost sad instead of joyful' (*GEL* 3: 36). The strain of this deception likely contributed to her post-publication depression (Haight 279).

The situation deteriorated further when Joseph Liggins, the impoverished son of a Nuneaton baker, led others to believe he was the secret author of Eliot's works. Controversy erupted in the press, with many commenters rallying behind Liggins. In response, first Blackwood and then Lewes, (writing as Eliot), publicly denied the rumours and called for privacy (*Times*, April 15, 1859 and June 30, 1859). Here again, Eliot found herself stripped of agency by men speaking on her behalf (and, it must be admitted, profiting by her silence). Writing to her close friend Sara Hennell in 1862, Eliot revealed the lasting damage: 'I was not at all well [...] my nerves were so jarred on the subject of my authorship, that I have never recovered the injury' (*GEL* 4: 28). Though she yearned for her work to be judged on merit alone, she and Lewes ultimately agreed that the mystery surrounding her authorship was good for business and continued to maintain it.

Managing Her Finances

Financial pressures prompted George Eliot to reveal her 'marriage' to her brother Isaac in 1857, nearly three years after she began living with Lewes and before *Adam Bede* brought much-needed stability. She asked Isaac to deposit her inheritance into Lewes's bank account: 'Will you be kind enough to pay my income to the account of Mr. G. H. Lewes, into the Union Bank of London, Charing Cross Branch, 4, Pall Mall East, Mr. Lewes having an account there' (*GEL* 2: 332). Biographer Ruby Redinger discovered that both this letter and subsequent correspondence with Isaac's lawyer exist only in Lewes's handwriting, but we can't know whether he copied the letter after she wrote it or she copied his letter (Redinger 340). In any case, Eliot's deception

regarding her 'marriage' proved catastrophic: Isaac severed ties with her for twenty-three years. The pain of this rupture would later surface in *The Mill on the Floss* and her 'Brother and Sister' sonnets, with their poignant memories of childhood bonds.

Though legally single and entitled to manage her own financial affairs – unlike most Victorian wives – Eliot surrendered financial independence when she allowed payments from her brother and then from her publisher to be deposited into Lewes's bank account. Even after revealing her authorship to Blackwood, and contracting for additional work, Eliot's earning continued to be paid to Lewes. This arrangement enabled him to support his extended family with increasing generosity. He gave regular allowances to his wife Agnes, his mother, and his sister-in-law, plus substantial gifts to Agnes's children, including those he did not claim as his own. Most notably, Lewes gave a whopping £1,800 in stocks to his nephew Vivien on his twenty-first birthday (Ashton 261; Haight 460–61). To put this amount into perspective, the Leweses paid £2,000 for the Priory, their most extravagant home (Haight 371). Meanwhile, Eliot sent only modest sums to her own family and a few friends in need – usually less than £50. Distribution of their money may have been mutually decided, but I have been unable to verify this. Since the accounts were in Lewes's name, he would not legally have had to consult her.

This arrangement proved problematic after Lewes's death in 1878. Though nearly all their income came from her writing, everything was registered to Lewes. Specifically, '[b]oth their homes – in London and in Witley – were in his name alone, as were all her earnings, along with securities worth more than £30,000' (Maddox 191). Apart from Eliot's earnings, Lewes's estate was valued less than £2,000, including his copyrights, which he left to his sons (Haight 523). Because the couple had never legally married and because Agnes Lewes was still living, transferring the money to Eliot was exceptionally complicated. I agree with Margaret Harris and Judith Johnson who contend, 'It is inconceivable that this business could have been conducted without her feeling humiliated' (*Journals* 150–51). Ironically, as a single woman, the properties, investments, and bank accounts could have been held legally in her own name, but they were not, leaving her vulnerable, if Agnes had contested the will. Eliot's half-sister Fanny observed sharply, 'of course, she was the source of the household expenses […] his poor legacy was a farce; besides, her name ought not to have been mentioned' (Haight 523n). Eliot had to navigate a complex legal process to prove that the money in Lewes's account was her income. She even had to change her name by deed poll to Lewes, the name she had been using illegally (Haight 523n).

Eliot seems not to have cared for the luxurious lifestyle her writing made possible. Even before the success of *Romola* made the couple very

wealthy, Eliot confessed to Sara Hennell that she already had 'more vulgar indulgences than [she] ever expected to have' and that she wanted only a simple life in the country with 'a small independence to save us from writing drivel for dishonest money' (*GEL* 3: 14–15). Whether it was a collaborative decision or one she felt coerced into making, granting Lewes exclusive access to all her income ultimately caused Eliot a great deal of stress, and she could have lost her entire fortune. If she was not happy with the arrangement, having Lewes manage all their money could have been a serious point of conflict. The following consideration of their respective ideas about wealth may shed light on this possibility.

Negotiating Her Publishing Contracts

George Henry Lewes's management of George Eliot's publishing contracts did not always go smoothly. For example, in 1856, Lewes believed he had secured a verbal agreement with publisher Henry George Bohn for a translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, a project Lewes may have begun but Eliot completed. When he submitted the manuscript, however, Bohn hesitated due to shifting market conditions, and there was a dispute over the terms. Lewes accused Bohn of forgetfulness and untrustworthiness, ultimately severing their relationship. The decision left Eliot's translation unpublished during her lifetime; the manuscript did not see the light of day until 1981, more than a century after their deaths.

After the great success of *Adam Bede*, Lewes decided to 'shop' the manuscript for *The Mill on the Floss* to other publishers who might be able to pay more. Eliot made it clear to Blackwood that she preferred to stick with him. Throughout the negotiations, she reassured him that he should 'not consider what others would give for the purposes of assisting them in their speculations but simply what was likely to produce a fair profit to [him]self with a good sum for her' (*GEL* 3: 233). Reporting Eliot's assurances to his brother, Blackwood added, 'She means what she says too I think. Lewes is much the keener of the two' (*GEL* 3: 233, Haight 317).

During the negotiations for *Romola*, Lewes's straightforward approach to business clashed with what Nancy Henry calls 'Eliot's puritanical beliefs in renunciation of wealth' and her 'Calvinist impulse to scrounge and renounce' (135). Lewes managed to secure an astonishing offer of £10,000 from George Smith, which he described as '[the] most magnificent offer ever yet made for a novel', but Eliot was reluctant to accept it (*GEL* 4: 18). She had always assured Blackwood that she was not driven by the wealth-generating potential of her books: 'I don't want the world to give me anything for my books except money enough to save me from the temptation to write only for money' (*GEL* 3: 152).

After Eliot declined the generous offer from Smith, Elder & Co – which was double Blackwood's proposal – Lewes returned to Smith, insisting he could persuade his 'reluctant and diffident' partner to publish *Romola* in Smith's *Cornhill Magazine*. 'She will I am pretty sure be guided by my wishes,' he wrote (*The Letters of GHL* 2: 34). Lewes's motives for pressuring Eliot seem closely tied to his own professional interests: just three months later, Smith offered him a consulting editor position for £600 a year with minimal work. Delighted, Lewes noted in his journal: 'This is very handsome, as the work promises to be light, and not disagreeable' (*GEL* 4: 29).

For Lewes, business dealings were distinct from personal bonds, while Eliot worried about leaving Blackwood, who had become a close friend. Ultimately, she accepted £7,500 from Smith for *Romola*, a compromise between the two publishers. Blackwood, blaming Lewes for the 'defection,' expressed his frustration to his brother (*GEL* 3: 233) but to Lewes and Eliot he remained gracious in defeat. When *Romola* didn't achieve the expected success and lost money for Smith, Lewes and Eliot happily returned to Blackwood for the publication of *Felix Holt, the Radical*, and stayed with him for the rest of her career.

Organizing Her Schedule

George Henry Lewes was highly protective of Eliot's writing and enforced strict rules that sometimes strained her personal relationships and well-being. He informed her friends that he had implemented a policy of 'rigidly exclud[ing] all public criticism from her sight' (*GEL* 5: 245) to keep her focus on writing rather than its reception. The couple also had an unusual 'rule' that Eliot would not make visits, even to those brave enough to invite her, defying Victorian etiquette. Georgianna Burne-Jones recalled that Lewes and Eliot 'never dined out' (Collins 56), which was generally true, unless they were traveling abroad.

While Lewes occasionally left for weeks to seek health treatments or visit friends, he denied Eliot the same freedom. In a letter to Maria Congreve the day after Lewes's departure for a two-week trip to Germany, Eliot wrote to decline her friend's invitation to 'come round for me on Sunday,' explaining that Lewes had intercepted it and 'on reading your letter [...] objected' to her attending public events without him (*GEL* 4: 413).

His restrictions even extended to critical personal circumstances; there are indications that Lewes forbade Eliot from visiting her beloved sister Chrissey on her deathbed. Very ill with consumption, Chrissey wrote to Eliot on February 24, 1859, expressing regret for having ceased to write her – a letter Eliot described later as having 'ploughed up my heart' (*GEL* 3: 23). Instead of rushing to Chrissey's side, Eliot was writing to Charles Bray

four days later that the prospect of leaving Lewes was like having a tooth pulled. This admission of co-dependence masked a more troubling comment, that Lewes 'stoutly resists' the idea of her leaving home, supposedly due to difficulties in hiring a new servant. On March 14th, Chrissey's daughter Emily wrote that Chrissey 'can't live many days'. There is no record of how she explained to her niece why she was not coming to see her dying sister, but after Chrissey's death a week later, on March 21, 1859, Eliot confided to Sara that 'the possibility of many things toward which I looked with some hope and yearning in the future' was 'taken from me' (*GEL* 3: 38). Taken by whom?

Lewes's protective management also extended to Eliot's creative process: he intervened when he felt she was not progressing quickly enough. His impatience surfaced in his complaints to Blackwood while she worked on *Romola*: 'This between ourselves. When you see her, mind your care is to discountenance the idea of a Romance being the product of an Encyclopaedia (*GEL* 3: 474). As Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*, Lewes again expressed frustration to Blackwood: 'I am hard at work and wish she were; but she simmers and simmers, despairs and despairs […]. A word from you may give her momentary confidence' (*GEL* 6: 11). His heavy-handed approach sometimes led to conflict: during the writing of *The Spanish Gypsy*, Eliot lamented in her journal, 'Ill with bilious headache, and very miserable about my soul as well as body. *George has taken my drama away from me'* (*Journals* 123; emphasis original). Contemporaries sometimes commented on Lewes's overprotectiveness; playwright Steele MacKay described Lewes as 'outrageously egotistical and so void of good taste as to even bully the woman – who has sacrificed everything for him – before me' (Collins 84–85). Alexander Ewing remarked that she is 'worked harder than any carthorse' by Lewes (Collins 128). Eliza Lynn Linton believed Eliot would never have produced her literary treasures without being '[i]mpelled by the force of circumstances to active labour' and not had 'the encouragement given her by Mr. Lewes' (Linton 518).

Handling Her Mail

Lewes's management of George Eliot's correspondence reveals a concerning power dynamic in their marriage. Since May 1855, when they first moved in together, all her mail was addressed to Mr. Lewes, Esq., to obscure their unmarried status. Lewes opened and passed along her letters, a practice that began before her rise to fame and continued throughout their relationship. While their routine may appear supportive, it granted Lewes an unusual level of control over Eliot's relationships with others, including her closest friends. In a letter to Charles Bray (23 July 1859), Eliot mentions receiving Lewes's permission to answer Bray's letter, suggesting Lewes influenced – or perhaps even dictated – her responses (*GEL* 3:120). Occasionally, Lewes added

postscripts to her letters, as seen in a note to Barbara Bodichon: 'But, dear Barbara, you must not call her Marian Evans again: that individual is extinct, rolled up, mashed, absorbed in the Lewesian magnificence!' (*GEL* 3: 65). This lighthearted tone nevertheless hints at overbearing protectiveness.

Lewes regularly handled the incoming mail, sometimes responding on Eliot's behalf instead of passing them along. He once admitted to Sara Hennell that he had 'contrived she should not see your letter'. He advised: 'never tell her anything that other people say about her books, for good or evil [...]. You can tell me any details [...] but for her let her mind be as much as possible fixed on her art and not on the public'. In the same letter, he even insisted, 'No one speaks about her books to her but me', and added, 'Of course you will take no notice of this letter' (*GEL* 4: 58–59). In another letter to Barbara, Lewes reiterated his instructions: 'Entre nous. Please don't write or tell Marian anything unpleasant that you hear unless it is important for her to hear it. She is so very sensitive, and has such a tendency to dwell on and believe in unpleasant ideas that I always keep them from her'. He concluded with, 'She knows nothing of this second post-script, of course' (*GEL* 3: 106).

In another instance, Lewes replied to a letter addressed to Eliot from William Hale White, a fellow writer from their *Westminster Review* days. White's attempt to reconnect in 1876 was met not with Eliot's words but with a four-sentence business-like reply from Lewes's that began, 'Mrs. Lewes is so much occupied just now that I relieve her from all correspondence that is not exclusively personal' (*GEL* 6: 248). As John Rignall has reported, White always cherished his memories of their friendship, and after her death, he wrote 'of his love for George Eliot' in his 'quasi-autobiographical fiction *The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford* (1881)' (Rignall 440). One wonders if Eliot ever saw his letter or Lewes's dismissive reply.

Lewes's screening of his partner's mail was not a secret. Outsiders such as Eliza Lynn Linton – who knew Lewes and Eliot before and after their union – recalled in her memoir that 'Mr. Lewes read all her letters before he handed them to her, keeping everything that might pain or annoy her' (*My Literary Life* 102). Eliot herself sometimes informed her correspondents that their messages were intercepted, perhaps as a gentle warning about their shared audience. She described to Elma Stuart how Lewes began his day: 'When I came down to breakfast the other day I found my husband's face radiant over your letter (ex officio he opens all my letters); and I wish you could have witnessed his emotion in reading it aloud to me' (*GEL* 5: 375). As biographers Kathryn Hughes and Rosemarie Bodenheimer have shown, the performative nature of Eliot's letter writing gains added significance when we recognize that Lewes not only served as a constant audience but also relieved

her of another task – quietly constraining her autonomy. Behaviour deemed abusive elsewhere might be interpreted as love; Lewes and Eliot always claimed it was love.

'Til Death Do Us Part

When Lewes died from enteritis in 1878, Eliot was understandably devastated. After all, he had been the centre of her life for more than two decades. However, she was certainly not helpless. In fact, Eliot demonstrated remarkable competence and business acumen in the wake of his death. First, she solicited tributes to Lewes and his work from old friends in journalism and she promptly established a scholarship in his name at Cambridge University. For a three-month mourning period, Eliot cloistered herself at the Priory to mourn in private but also to complete Lewes's unfinished magnum opus, *Problems of Life and Mind,* much as *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea nearly promises to complete Casaubon's unfinished *Key to All Mythologies*. Using Lewes's notes, Eliot wrote the final two volumes of the five-volume set and arranged the whole for publication. She ensured a glowing legacy for Lewes before she turned her attention to her own needs. And in choosing John Cross for her next partner, she safeguarded her own future reputation as well.

More Marriage Questions

By all accounts, Lewes was extremely protective, but protective does not necessarily equal restrictive. The rules supporting Eliot's writing career were ones she apparently accepted willingly. Was she truly, as Gordon Haight suggested in his 1968 biography, a woman 'not fitted to stand alone,' (Haight 530) always needing 'someone to lean on'? (Haight 148). I align with feminist biographers who insist this characterization contradicts Eliot's independent spirit, particularly evident before and after her relationship with Lewes. But none of us can say what she would or would not have wanted from her partner. While Lewes's level of 'nurturing' may seem shocking today, there is no definitive evidence of coercive control.

Though I have exposed points of potential friction, Eliot never overtly criticizes Lewes in her surviving letters or journals. Whether the silenced, suffering heroines in her fiction – Janet Dempster, Romola Melema, Dorothea Casaubon, Gwendolen Grandcourt, Julia Merman – reflect her personal experience remains speculation. Edith Simcox, Eliot's younger friend, celebrated the very behaviours I find concerning, praising how Lewes 'stood between her and the world' and managed her affairs so she could write. For Simcox, this represented 'the most faithful perfect love that ever crowned a woman's life' (Simcox 783).[4] Meanwhile, Margaret Oliphant seems almost jealous of Eliot's situation, wondering if she 'should have done better if I had

been kept, like [George Eliot], in a mental greenhouse and taken care of?' (Oliphant 272). Oliphant's greenhouse metaphor is particularly apt – Lewes treated Eliot as a delicate orchid requiring constant care. Yet orchids are remarkably resilient, flourishing with minimal attention and even tolerating benign neglect. While Haight contended Eliot 'probably would have written nothing' without Lewes's protectiveness (Haight 369), I suspect she, like a hardy orchid, would have found a way to thrive. She was no fragile bloom, but a resilient spirit who blossomed – regardless of the care or constraints George Henry Lewes provided.

NOTES

1 As the title suggests, this lecture is both an acknowledgment and an appreciation of Clare Carlisle's *The Marriage Question: George Eliot's Double Life* (2023). I recommend this excellent book for its thoughtful and detailed analysis of a complex marriage – a subject I first explored extensively during my graduate studies and in later published articles (see Works Cited). Drawing on this earlier work, I see this essay as a companion to *The Marriage Question*, offering additional perspectives that enrich the conversation without competing with Carlisle's remarkable achievement.

2 Thomas Woolner to William Bell Scott, October 4, 1854 (*GEL* 2: 175–76). Both men had been Lewes's friends. Perhaps Lewes was receiving a taste of his own medicine. After encouraging Charlotte Brontë in her writing as a friend, Lewes published a harshly critical review of *Shirley* in the Edinburgh Review and outed Currer Bell as a woman. Deeply hurt, Brontë wrote him a brief letter that read 'God save me from my friends' (12 January 1850, Add MS 43267, British Library).

3 From Janet and Robert Dempster in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, to Romola and Tito in *Romola*, to Dorothea and Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, to Gwendolen and Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*, to Julia and Proteus Merman in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, these fictional marriages explore how seemingly loving relationships can become painfully constraining. This recurring narrative framework not only unifies Eliot's artistic vision but may also reflect insights from her personal experience, despite her public presentation of her relationship with Lewes as ideal.

4 Though Simcox concludes that their love was perfect, she judges positively the same behaviours I have identified as problematic. A more complete excerpt may be useful for the sake of comparison: '[Lewes] stood between her and the world, he relieved her from all those minor cares which chafe and fret the artist's soul; he wrote her letters (a proceeding for which he would say laughingly her correspondents were not grateful); in a word, he so smoothed the course of her outer life as to leave all her powers free to do what she alone could do for the world and for the many who looked to her for help and guidance. No doubt this devotion brought its own reward, but […] great as his reward was, it was no greater than was merited by the most faithful perfect love that ever crowned a woman's life'.

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