

## Simulations of the Androgynous Society:

### Shattering Gender Stereotypes in George Eliot's *Silas Marner*

For individuals such as George Eliot, Victorian society was nothing more than a social prison. At the time, women served as ornaments of society and keepers of the hearth while men dwelled in the public sphere of commerce and politics. Eliot staunchly resisted these expectations, from writing under a male pen name to publishing the slim yet subversive book *Silas Marner*. Rosemarie Bodenheimer asserts that “[i]t was typical of George Eliot to reverse the genders when she took on the darkest and most alienated parts of herself; she was to do so again when she invented Silas Marner” (135). As a man willing to revolt against the ideology of his gender, the author’s protagonist exists as Eliot’s mirror image. The author works through him and a series of other multifaceted characters to argue for a wider acceptance of androgynous societal roles. Silas’s accidental motherhood redeems his purpose while saving Eppie's life; Eppie’s idyllic life with Silas is preserved by her refusal to be treated as a possession by male authority figures; Priscilla's ability to protect the well-being of her family stems from her avoidance of a husband and assumption of a “masculine” managerial position. Through the contradictory successes of these individuals who fail to conform to their expected niches in *Silas Marner*, the author demands a more effective society that is free from the arbitrary burdens of gender expectations.

No one better embodies the struggle of breaking gender barriers than the main character himself, Silas Marner, a man who, throughout the course of the novel, executes a complete shift from miserable masculinity to compassionate motherhood. Betrayed by his close friend and his ex-fiancée, Silas begins the novel in exile from the community that he once called home. Stripped of security and identity, Silas reacts radically to his subsequent loss of self: he deeply

embeds himself into the masculine identity which society is too eager to offer him. This process is most prominently characterized by Silas's unslakable materialistic greed. To establish himself as a respectable male in an unfamiliar town, Silas's obsession with the acquisition of shiny golden guineas becomes his sole reason for existence. However, when Dunstan Cass thoughtlessly steals Silas's precious savings, Silas's universe and entire reason for existence is obliterated. Through this tragic upheaval, Eliot issues her stern warning: men who pour their life purpose into gender roles will, like a devastated Silas, end up with absolutely nothing. Only by breaking such societal expectations can true meaning be seen. Thus, it is into Silas's hopeless world that an unlikely savior wanders.

An infant child hardly resembles a pile of guineas, but in Silas's delirious joy, this is his first conclusion. However, it is not his gold that Silas discovers on the hearth in his home but "a sleeping child" (112). Silas's mistake symbolizes the beginnings of a new life. By jumbling the identity of a golden coin, the epitome of the masculine power, and the golden hair of a child, the essence of domestic responsibility, Silas's redemption through the formation of an androgynous new identity is introduced. Because the Victorian perception of raising a daughter was perceived as more maternal than paternal, Silas immediately becomes a mother to Eppie. Liberated from the bondage of masculinity, Silas rejoices: "The gold had kept his thoughts in an ever-repeated circle...but Eppie was an object compacted of changes and hopes that forced his thoughts onward" (128). Through this joyous statement, Eliot suggests a utopian society in which gender expectations are shed for androgyny: a world of limitless opportunity.

In regards to Silas's emerging maternity, Ingrid Ranum asserts a differing claim: that the man has not entered the feminine sphere but rather has created a new form of "domestic masculinity" that exists not as a "countercultural statement" but as a reflection of male privilege,

rooted in their ability to enter both the public and domestic spheres (334). However, Ranum's argument does not take into account Silas's methods of parenting. Raising Eppie is not "an embodiment of his job" as Ranum claims but Silas's revitalized purpose for existing (334). Silas's motherhood is treated as the opposite of a continuation of his business actions; parenthood has "come to replace his hoard which gave a growing purpose to the earnings, drawing his hope and joy continually onward beyond the money" (134). Thus, Silas's shift is not from public to domestic masculinity but instead toward what scholar Chao-Feng Cheng labels as his "androgynous ideal, a harmonious co-existence of the so-called masculine and feminine attributes" and ultimately "a different consciousness and whole new life for himself" (50).

The persuasive power of *Silas Marner* does not end with the single storyline of its main character. Its message is also derived from the development of another character: Silas's adopted daughter Eppie. She is born into a difficult age for young girls; the proclivities of parents were to transform their daughters into objects to be "played with" and "sold" to another "buyer" when they came of age. Unconsciously, Silas succumbs to this Victorian ideology. Immediately after finding Eppie, Silas tells the village that "[i]t's come to me—I've a right to keep it" (117) and "she'll be *my* little un... She'll be nobody else's" (125), Silas's mind has submitted itself to another societal expectation: that young children, especially girls, can be owned in any form. It is into this misguided world that Eppie is introduced, foreshadowing a difficult journey ahead for the character: only by reclaiming herself can she take control of her own happiness and purpose.

Perhaps unknowingly, Eppie pushes back against her expected role as obedient daughter and dependent member of a male-dominated household from her earliest moments of life. As a child, she takes delight in disobeying her father, going as far as running away from the house and twisting her punishment in the coal-hole into a silly game. Eliot hints through these seemingly

light and heartwarming childhood stories that there may be broader consequences for Eppie's stubbornness in refusing to submit male authority or to conform to the societal conceptualizations of the perfect daughter. It comes as no surprise, then, that when Eliot's novel jumps a decade ahead, the roles in the Marner household have nearly switched. Is not clear who is caretaker anymore, as illustrated through Silas's nervous confession to Eppie: "I shall get older and helpless, and be a burden on you" (151). Larry Shillock builds on this dynamic by explaining:

Eppie, too, "masters" her father from an early age, despite the fact that "he," as father, is the sanctioned economic authority, as well as the "she"--that is to say, mother--who governs the family's leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations. It is unlikely indeed that a young child would exercise jurisdiction over how these behaviors affect her own and her adoptive father's identity; but theirs is an unlikely family, and exercise them she does.

Shillock reinforces the refreshing obliviousness to Eppie's navigation of society. She does not care what tradition dictates; just as Silas has acted as a mother to Eppie, Eppie will now act as a fatherly provider to her guardian as well. This is the first telling trial of the character's young adult life that strengthens her androgynous identity as an individual capable of managing herself in both domestic and public spheres. Her next trial proves to be even more important.

Upon Godfrey Cass's confession to his wife that Eppie is his biological daughter, the two resolve to try and regain custody of her. When the couple arrives at the Marner home to reveal their intentions, Eppie is faced with the greatest decision of her life thus far: to submit herself to high ranking man's request that she join the family as a subservient and decorative addition to the household, or defy both her biological father, village patriarchal leader, and the fabric of

present society itself by declining the demand. Eliot's message reaches fruition through Eppie's victorious response: she shocks every person in the room through her declaration, "I can't leave my father...And I don't want to be a lady— thank you all the same" (170).

Not only does Eppie defy the gender roles of her time, but she loads her words with androgynous double meaning. Her claim that she does not wish to be a lady first applies to her reluctance to being dressed up and paraded through the streets; she will not be objectified by her culture any longer. In addition, her claim "I don't want to be a lady" may apply to unwillingness to be seen as a female at all; embittered by a life of societal oppression, she longs to transcend the gender role into which she was born and assumes an androgynous identity instead. Through Eppie's journey from rebellious toddler to a stouthearted disregarder of gender roles, Eliot furthers the argument first established through Silas's unconventional form of motherhood.

It was inevitable that in the course of writing this paper the only permanently single woman in all of Eliot's novels would be addressed. Priscilla Lammeter is perhaps the most fascinating female character in *Silas Marner* due to her unapologetic adherence to a life devoid of dependence on men. She is first introduced as the shamelessly single sister of Nancy Lammeter, as she will remain throughout the novel. It is telling that one of the character's first lines is the declaration that "Mr. Have-your-own-way is the best husband, and the only one I'd ever promise to obey" (94). Priscilla's true love is her freedom to do as she wishes; Shillock defines this "complementary feminine-masculine transformation" by her disinterest in marriage and the fact that she does not "consider herself superfluous or lacking as a result." Indeed, Priscilla sees men more as pesky insects hindering her untroubled lifestyle, japing to her sister that "[t]he pretty uns do for fly-catchers—they keep the men off us" (94). But Eliot does not stop here in her imaginings of the completely androgynous woman.

In addition to Priscilla's refusal to enter wedlock, she performs another staggering social rebellion: she manages her father's estate. From overseeing the family's servants to driving her father's gig, the woman has ultimate control over the inner workings of this traditionally masculine sphere. The dramatic role reversal of the situation is fittingly summarized by Mr. Lammeter: "[Priscilla] manages me and the farm too" (153). In admitting this fact, her father has surrendered all male dominance to his daughter. She has thoroughly penetrated the public sphere to the point that even the supposed patriarch of the family submits verbal and behavioral deference to her, placing the future of the estate in her capable hands. In doing so, she absorbs the qualities that root him in his masculine identity; Priscilla ultimately becomes her father. This drastic shift in self can easily be misinterpreted as simple daughterly duty. In reality it is the reconstruction of domestic woman into an empowered, unimpeded individual.

Just as Mary Anne Evans delicately shrouded herself in a male identity by using the pseudonym George Eliot, she buried her yearnings for a societal system mirrored in the core characters of her book. Through the radical story arcs of Silas, Eppie, and Priscilla, the author provides tangible scenarios for societal change, relatable enough to be applied with discretion by any member of Victorian society. Eliot's characters are catalysts for reform: they present an optimistic view of an androgynous community, a world in which individuals could live unhindered by the roles that prevent them from accepting their fully realized identities, completed by a collection of traits traditionally classified as both masculine and feminine. Through the trials and triumphs of fictional characters with compellingly real and relevant problems, *Silas Marner* is therefore not a vision of a society liberated by the breaking of gender roles. Instead, it is a simulation of women and men with the audacity and tenacity to embrace the risk and reward of complete change.

## Works Cited

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