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WRITERS IN THEIR TIME

George Eliot

Godless Woman

Brian Spittles

Macmillan Education

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For Matthew, Edmund and Brian

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Abbreviations

Page references to Eliot's novels are to the following Penguin editions:

Adam Bede (1985)
Daniel Deronda (1986)
Felix Holt (1987)
Middlemarch (1985)
The Mill on the Floss (1985)
Romola (1980)
Silas Marner (1985)

Compilations of other writing by Eliot are referenced by the following coding:

- GEL Gordon S. Haight (ed.), *The George Eliot Letters*
 Volumes I-III (London: Oxford University Press, 1954)
 Volumes IV-VII (London: Oxford University Press, 1956)
 Volumes VIII-IX (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978)
- LIFE J. W. Cross (ed.), *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, New Edition (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1887)
- POEMS Lucien Jenkins (ed.), *George Eliot: Collected Poems* (London: Skoob Books Publishing Ltd, 1989)
- SEP A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (eds), *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990)
- SL Gordon S. Haight (ed.), *Selections from George Eliot's Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985)

General Editor's Preface

In recent years many critics and teachers have become convinced of the importance of recognizing that works of literature are grounded in the conditions of their production in the widest possible sense of that phrase – in the history, society, ideas and ideologies of their time, the lives and careers of their authors, and the prevailing circumstances of the literary market-place and the reading public. To some extent this development reflects both a disenchantment with the 'practical criticism' approach that held sway for so long in school, college and university teaching of literature and a scepticism towards the ahistorical biases encouraged by some more recent schools of critical theory.

It is true that lip-service has long been paid to 'background': the English Tripos at Cambridge, for instance, embodied the 'life, literature and thought' formula from its early years. Such an approach, however, tended to treat 'background' as distinct and detachable from literary works and as constituting a relatively minor, marginal and even optional element in the study of a text. What is now perceived to be in question is something more vital and more central: not a loosely defined relationship between certain novels, plays and poems on the one hand and 'history' or 'ideas' on the other, but an intimate informing and shaping of the one by the other. Colonialism in Conrad or Kipling, Christian theology in Milton or Bunyan, scientific discovery in Tennyson or Hardy, politics in Yeats or Eliot: these are not background issues against which the texts can be foregrounded but crucial determinants of the very nature of the texts themselves without which they would be radically different and which profoundly affect the way we understand and value them.

At the same time, as most teachers are ready to attest, even a basic knowledge of the historical and cultural conditions of past including recently past, generations cannot be taken for granted. To many students, periods as recent as the 1930s or the Great War are largely a closed book, while key concepts of earlier generations such as Darwinism or Puritanism, and major movements

such as the spread of literacy and the growth and decline of imperialism, are known in the sketchiest outline if at all.

This series is intended to provide in an accessible form materials that will make possible a fuller and deeper understanding of the work of the major authors by demonstrating in detail its relationship to the world, including the intellectual world, in which it was produced. Its starting-point is not a notion of 'background' but a conviction that many, perhaps most, great writers are in an integral sense *in* and *of* their time. Each volume will look afresh at the primary texts (or a selection of them) in relation to the ways in which they have been informed and shaped by both the external and the ideological conditions of their worlds. Historical, political, scientific, theological, philosophical and other dimensions will be explored as appropriate. By understanding more fully the contexts which have made particular works what they are and not otherwise, students and others will be able to bring new understanding to their reading of the texts.

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