FRAGMENTARY READING IN A MALE-DOMINATED CULTURE: THE FATE OF GEORGE ELIOT'S PRECOCIOUS FEMALE SAGE

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Abstract This study argues that Victorian female characters like George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), denied the classical education their more practical male counterparts enjoy, attempt to create stories around their readings, anticipate plot developments, and finally come to realize the deficiencies of male worldly wisdom. As a result, they turn to out-of-this-world masculine wisdom, the Word of God, practice submission and self-renunciation, and ultimately escape their own plots in a heroic gesture, announcing, as it were, that heroines of the stamp of a Saint Theresa can no longer emerge from a Victorian society that systematically fails to educate its women. Maggie Tulliver is neither the first nor the last female character who struggles to combine a literary discourse of the past with newer forms of narrative discourse, yet she is perhaps the most vibrant example of the nineteenth-century passive-aggressive reader. George Eliot's precocious female sage is at a crossroads historically, culturally, as well as ideologically, emblematically enacting the shift in reading practices that characterized the nineteenth century, when the Victorian reader became part of a larger cultural movement transitioning from homogenous, selective reading to a heterogenous, scanning type of reading. Eliot's novels seem to be pivoting on this shift, allowing their readers to practice non-sequential reading of characters who themselves are readers of parts. This fragmentariness, as Eliot seems to say, defines the very psychology of nineteenth-century print culture.
Keywords Nineteenth-century print culture; female reader; fragmentary reading; religious literature; secular literature.

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1. Introduction

In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Maggie Tulliver's books serve as an oracle providing predictions of the heroine's future and augmenting the tragic dimensions of the novel. Akin to her fictional sibling, Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver practices solitary, unsupervised reading and is gifted with a great and various stock of creative strength. The forces of the story bearing the modern reader into the heroine's childhood show her reading carrying a portentous message. Her adult reading experience constantly consults the past and ties itself to the geography of the Floss and the Mill, where Maggie first discovered her penchant for books and a retreat from her emotional wounds. The books that intrigue Maggie, some of which she remolds with her expansive, creative imagination and refuses to accept their plots, provide an implicit snapshot of her thought-processes, of the themes adding depth to the storyline and the unfolding plot of the novel.

The literary texts that pervade George Eliot's allusive writing functioned primarily as a springboard to her own intellectual development. Before and after Mary Anne Evans wrote under the male pseudonym of George Eliot, she fed into the work of her 18th-century literary ancestors, including Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. Then, it is not surprising that she crafted Maggie's life as a textual replica of her reading exercises. Many of the writers who penned novels in the second half of the nineteenth-century, including Thomas Hardy and the French Gustave Flaubert, in fact, built into the telling of their tales the belief that reading matter leads its subjects into a precarious solipsism, teaches barren and counterproductive forms of knowledge and, worst of all, gives way to the idea that nature's most hidden enigmas can be comprehended and the natural world systematized through rational precepts. Even Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Use and Abuse of History* (1949, 1957), fiercely penalizes the modern man who equates education in its general sense with historical education and condemns modern education for determining young people to earn knowledge of history and culture precociously, before they get hold of an essential knowledge of life. Direct experience loses ground among young people, while secondhand information about the individual and the world makes headway. Such a modern education has perversely converted modern readers into "wandering encyclopedias", with inside contents appreciated less than their "barbarous" outside bindings. Modern readers become "at last more careless and accommodating in external matters, and the considerable cleft between substance and form is widened until they no longer have any feeling for barbarism, if only their memories are kept continually titillated and there flows a constant stream of new things to be known that can be neatly packed into the cupboards of their memory."[1]

Within the general Western reading tradition, boys were customarily called to attend substance, while girls' learning was cleft asunder into form. This emphasis on women's surface-scratching, superficial learning attempts and the concepts of form and substance define

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1949. 1957), 24-25, my emphasis.

Maggie Tulliver's access to print material and growth into womanhood in each of the backgrounds illustrated by The Mill on the Floss – the Floss, the Ripple, Dorlcote Mill, the Red Deeps, the Round Pools, the Great Ash, Garum Firs, Dunlow Common and the whole landscape of St. Ogg's with its past invoked throughout the novel. Right beneath Nietzsche's distrust of modern reading lurked a Puritan tradition that was mistrustful of the written, secular word, inferior to the Word as logos, the spiritual incarnation of Christ, found in the Scriptures. A concern surrounding the Scriptures arose because, to the casual eye, they seemed to warrant authority (their scribe was perceived as physically absent) and, thus, potential interpreters and interpretations could ostensibly open their content to debate. Puritans, nevertheless, insisted that "the Scriptures were logos rather than mythos, that they offer revelations and divine counsel, as God speaks personally through them to the reader."[2] These conflicting ideas become apparent, in diverse ways, in The Mill on the Floss, for a reading heroine that becomes interested in both fifteenth-century devotional literature demanding a meek and servile implied reader and secular reading options (romances, satiric attacks on women as devils, the dictionary, schoolbooks). The fate of Eliot's woman reader is dismal: neither spiritual literature nor the romance form gives her solutions to her social predicaments.

2. Key intertextual differences in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)

Maggie's intellectual energies draw her to the past and the early years of her childhood when she fashioned stories of the insect world and was entertained by the Mill-wheel and the book illustrations depicting drowning witches. The modern reader senses that the idiom of the novel constantly invokes the past – this is a detail which establishes the understanding of the novel's emotional climate and asks the reader to revive his reading memory – as Tom, Rev. Stelling's pupil, looks forward to the holidays to go back home and enjoy the natural rhythm of the Tulliver hearth; as Maggie reminisces "all the subtle inextricable associations that fleeting hours of [their] childhood left behind them;"[3] as Mrs. Tulliver laments the loss of her linen, silver teapots, spoons, skewers and ladles; or as Mr. Tulliver tortures himself thinking about the ill-spirited legal fight with Lawyer Wakem. The many pasts to which the novel draws attention – embedded in the past of the old town of St. Ogg's, with its Gothic façade and towers conquered by Roman, Saxon, Norman legions, affected by bad harvests or mysterious fluctuations of trade – will be paraded once more before Maggie's eyes at the end of the novel, as she passes past the town's houses and buildings, carried by the Floss, for the last time, in the arms of her brother, to the drowning finale of her life.

The inaugural chapters of the book introduce the reader to the Tullivers. The Tulliver library puts for display books commonly owned by Victorian families, such as the Bible, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Dying*, Daniel Defoe's *The*

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[2] Carla Peterson, *The Determined Reader* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1944), 10.

[3] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Broadview Editions, 1860), 84.

History of the Devil, along with *Æsop's Fables*, *Animated Nature*, *Pug's Tour Through Europe; or the Travell'd Monkey* and a Catechism of Geography. What does this small collection of books allude to? Maggie possesses both old and new books, diverse in genre, content and style. It is an intensive reader's collection. Her reading material is limited, but well read and reread. If it were not for Maggie, the other members of the Tulliver family would let the books languish on the shelves. The narrator is very assertive in telling the external reader that neither the Tullivers nor the Dodsons have immersed themselves into the fundamental books of the Puritanist canon or the more secular types of readings, absorbing no spiritual or "profane" messages from the two knowledge repositories. The only doctrine they have adopted is "a variation of Protestantism unknown to Bossuet,"[4] a religious belief that preserves, in fact, "little trace of religion,"[5] associated with superstition, rigid rules and adherence to ancestral heritage, rituals devoid of meaning, and, perhaps just as importantly, with a persistent devotion to financial well-being. Their world is one of conserved, untouched values (Mrs. Tulliver's concern for her dowry is perturbing, to say the least), of a God alien to those in power and unknown to the ignorant. Eliot seems to ponder upon the question of whether or the protagonist's journey towards the heavenly destination, the Celestial City in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is still possible in late Victorian England.

For the other characters, books signify scribbled documents which can be used at will to make 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' promise to a dying father, to keep pressed flowers in or a reason to bemoan the lack of house furnishings: "Why should they buy many books when they bought so little furniture?"[6] asks Maggie's brother, Tom, in Eliot's 1860 novel. Books represent, thus, either home furnishings and even table accessories for show (for the Dodson sisters, Maggie's aunts), or depositories of truths that remain unchanged from one copy to another, one reader's edition to another (for Maggie). Books are, in the world of the *Mill*, a toss-up between culture and commodity. Eliot reasserts, through Maggie Tulliver and her immediate circle, that books transform the Victorians' lives on both the grandest and the smallest of scales. Maggie, a female reader drawn to the spiritual and material past, where she finds models and ideals of readership (since no such models parade before her eyes in her contemporary society), traces in their bindings remnants of the previous owners' memory:

> "Our dear old *Pilgrim's Progress* that you colored with your little paints (…) I thought we should never part with that while we lived – everything is going away from us – the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!"[7]

The Mill on the Floss insists, through Maggie's character, that reading does not necessarily mean private, intense, individualistic engagement with the text, but rather a process of self-

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[4] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Broadview Editions, 1860), 292.
[5] Ibid., 293.
[6] Ibid., 265.
[7] Ibid., 265.

discovery that asserts itself over time. When Tom swears with his hands on the Good Book to teach the "evil" lawyer Mr. Wakem, his father's enemy, a lesson, Maggie defies his profane pseudo-reading act: "O father, what? (…) It's wicked to curse and bear malice."[8] In a sense, Maggie's prophecies lay out the tragic unfolding of the events in *The Mill*, signaling to the reader that swearing a pagan oath on the Good Book does not amount to true reading, which necessarily involves making sense of a meaningful string of signs instead of linking the practice of reading with superstitious oath-making. Tom might be inclined to believe that both sacred books and cheapish, relatively new paperback are mere commodities, but Maggie does not. Ever since she was a child, Maggie has had difficulty laying aside her much adored books, restraining herself from not reading them again and again, poring over, considering and re-considering them with ease. Eliot's precocious female sage undertakes active, imaginative reading practices as the ones endorsed by educated, affluent readers of her time, despite being poor and educationally deprived. Maggie's experience speaks to a majority of readers who were disadvantaged through not having other family members interested in books. To Maggie's nearest and dearest, that Maggie reads is perceived as *useless* and *unimportant*. Reading could even render her useless for the concreteness of real, lived-through life, as Mr. Tulliver worries at the novel's start: "a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt."[9]

Throughout the novel, the speech accreted around the notion of female reading is laced with dire warnings of social danger. Zealous in his paternal duties, Mr. Tulliver oftentimes takes pride in Maggie's intellectual capacity with hesitating satisfaction: "I don't know I' what she's behind other folks' children; an' she can read almost as well as the parson (…) It's a pity but what she'd been the lad – she'd been a match for the lawyers, *she* would."[10] Maggie's brother, on the other hand, "isn't not [sic] to say stupid – he's got a notion o' things out o' door, an' a sort o' common sense, as he'd lay hold o' things by the right handle", although he is "slow with his tongue (…), reads but poorly and can't abide the books, and spells all wrong."[11] Tom, as the reader soon learns, takes a special interest in whatever belongs to nature (thus, an education in science and practical matters would have suited him better) rather than in learning foreign languages and reading the classics. Mr. Tulliver does everything a loving father would to grant Tom access to classical studies at King's Lorton. The external reader learns progressively that Maggie's education did not promise much right from the start. As a result, Tom is overfed Latin and geometry by the slow-witted clerical tutor, Mr. Stelling. Maggie, with a real propensity towards classical studies and foreign language acquisition, is obliged to turn to whatever books she may find at home or read, in her adolescence, beyond the Tulliver hearth (with Philip Wakem, the learned male counterpart of *Jane Eyre*'s Bessie, as a substitute tutor).

[8] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Broadview Editions, 1860), 291.
[9] Ibid., 61.
[10] Ibid., 63.
[11] Ibid., 64.

Mr. Tulliver's rather narrow worldview is monopolized by images of the devil, by "Old Harry,"[12] and thus, it is only natural that Defoe's *The History of the Devil* is granted a place on the family library's shelves. Defoe's Devil is attributed a modern career, diminished ontologically and diabolically. Despite the features he borrows from both the biblical and the Miltonian versions, Defoe's Satan is personalized – his representation is as genuine as Defoe can depict it (in fact, *The History of the Devil* criticizes Milton's dogma). On the whole, Defoe's writing is patterned after an eighteenth-century religious worldview, but does not take it into account to validate its dogma. In Chapter X, Defoe declares that "Satan has not a more certain knowledge of [future] events than we; (…) he may be able to make stronger conjectures and more rational conclusions from what he sees (…) and (…) he sees more to conclude from than we can, but (…) he knows nothing of futurity more than he can see by observation and inference"[13] and sets forth the idea that good spirits can be set apart from diabolic ones judging by their actions. Mr. Tulliver's worldview seems to be more in accord with Defoe's *History* than with Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, since he perceives diabolical forces as more powerful and threatening than Christian's battle with the devil. Maggie's father does not rely on providential assistance or God's guidance – according to his perspective, satanic real-world figures such as lawyer Wakem outwit good forces. He perceives the world through Puritan lens, as a lawless and disorganized battle ground, where the written word and literacy – with its incarnation, lawyer Wakem – reigns and cripples orality. He takes on a distrustful attitude towards written culture: never indulges in reading books or writing, for that matter, and he casts a suspicious eye to oral debates and verbal arguments. Writing, to Mr. Tulliver, is obscure, enigmatic and occult. So is evil. He cannot manipulate the traditional distinction between Manichean hero/villain to allow a degree of variability. Reading and writing (so fearfully assessed by him as mysterious and dangerous) would grant Mr. Tulliver, in moral terms, the quality of unexpectedness, the element of surprise.

The childhood world of Maggie and Tom Tulliver is crucial in determining the influence of their early years upon their adulthood. It creates a past-ridded mood and prompts the reader towards contemplation. Chapter *Boy and Girl* in Book 1 allows the reader an inside look into Maggie's life and feelings and the importance of the great, rushing Floss in terms of narrative spatiality. Maggie (longing for her brother's attention) and Tom (supervising the whole affair, as usual) have gone fishing and:

> "It was one of their happy mornings. They trotted along and sat down together, with no thought that life would ever change much for them; they would only get bigger and not go to school, and it would always be like the holidays; they would always live together and be fond of each other. And the mill with its booming—the great chestnut-tree under which they played at houses—their own little river, the Ripple, where the banks seemed like home, and Tom was always seeing the water- rats, while

[12] Ibid., 59.

[13] Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil* (Boston: Dow & Jackson, 1726), 106.

> Maggie gathered the purple plumy tops of the reeds, which she forgot and dropped afterwards—above all, the great Floss, along which they wandered with a sense of travel, to see the rushing spring-tide, the awful Eagre, come up like a hungry monster, or to see the Great Ash which had once wailed and groaned like a man—these things would always be just the same to them."[14]

"These things would *always* be just *the same* to them," announces the narrator, and the reader is under the influence of working miracles of detail. The attention of the reader to vivid little scenes, to digressions embracing explanatory insights and symbolic language effects is riveted to such a degree that it persuades the reader to return remorselessly to significant passages and key words that included calculated, strategic textual obstacles. The subsequent paragraph both rewards the curiosity of the reader and underlines that, whatever the novel's denouement, Maggie's narrative (and that of all the other Tullivers) will be highly touched by these first years: "Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet, they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives."[15] They will eventually wander with a sense of closing movement along the floodwaters of their own little Ripple in a brother-sister reunion and "these things would *always* be just *the same* to them" – they will enact both reconciliation and retribution, both completion and destruction.

Book 2 paints the image of a boy sent to a private tutor, rev. Stelling, entirely incompatible with book-learning focusing on Latin and mathematical theorems, longing for the life lived inside the Tulliver family, the Mill, and the company of Luke and his dog. Maggie's feelings towards Tom's education and opportunities for reading, however, stand at the opposite end of the continuum. Visiting Tom at King's Lorton "with the sensation that she was taking a great journey, and beginning to see the world" (180) and upon entering the study, Maggie bursts out: "O, what books! (…) How I should like to have as many books as that!"[16] Her excited bewilderment is unsettling for Tom, who is peculiarly at odds with the educational "privilege for which Mr. Tulliver paid a high price."[17] What becomes readily available for the twenty-first century reader is the obvious tension between women of mind and male culture. Eliot's own performance as a female intellectual and her views on women intellectuals in her essays and letters, as critics have observed, suggest a startling tension between two ideologies (female mind versus male culture) seemingly incongruous and threatening formal coherence. This tension may be handled by writers by transferring to another area what is irrational, paradoxical, even beyond bearing. One possible outlet for such transfer was put forth by William Dowling in his 1984 study of political consciousness, which suggests that male domination of female intellectuality is possible because the male-dominated culture and

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[14] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Broadview Editions, 1860), 83.
[15] Ibid..
[16] Ibid., 182.
[17] Ibid., 172.

society achieves ideological coherence by using a strategy of *containment*, that is, "by shutting out the truth about History."[18] Eliot's writings address this problematic issue and indicate that, in fact, the topos of this ideological coherence stretches somewhere beyond history, outside chronological time: in this extra-spatial, extra-temporal territory, women possess unrestricted, timeless and deep-rooted characteristics making them resistant to incarcerating inhibitions of male-dominated culture and society. An illustrative strategy of containment is mirrored in Maggie's bewilderment at one of the maxims included in the Eton Grammar[19] (Tom's schoolbook):

> "The astronomer who hated women generally, caused her so much puzzling speculation that she one day asked Mr. Stelling if all astronomers hated women, or whether it was only this particular astronomer. But, fore- stalling his answer, she said— 'I suppose it's all astronomers: because, you know, they live up in high towers, and if the women came there, they might talk and hinder them from looking at the stars.' Mr. Stelling liked her prattle immensely, and they were on the best terms."[20]

This is an explicit instance of the way in which women's miseducation was institutionalized – maximized, as it were – in the nineteenth century. Since meaning is (or should be) something articulable that is not fixed or limited by other viewpoints, the result of a hard-won, provisional process that conjoins the desire for knowledge, the reader can already notice, at this very point in the narrative, that Tom's tutor is not an adept of attentive pedagogy. He certainly is blind to Maggie's fine and finely tuned arguments. His teaching method, however, taps into and provides a platform for asking larger questions about the general reliability of the Victorian male tutor. If Maggie lacks genuine opportunities at a *real*, substantial education by being kept at home and having her discourse associated with "prattle," refused a private tutor and confined to domesticity, then *so does Tom*, as Eliot cleverly insinuates. Upper-class English boys, history informs us, were sent off in the Victorian era to boarding schools at around age ten. They learned during such apprenticeship independence and specific skills for getting along in the world. There were a few schools for girls, but almost no girl was actually sent to school. The reader might wonder why. It was because their education was significantly less important than the education of boys and generally families considered it safer for them to remain within the hearth, where mothers were in charge of their daughters' education (especially when circumstances did not allow them to hire a governess). Maggie, nevertheless, is given little if any guidance from her mother.

Eliot's heroine has, then, no other option than to mimic the ideas and perspectives of other fictional men or male authors. Ill-suited for teaching as Mr. Stelling is, he also imparts a

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[18] William C. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser, Marx. An Introduction to Political Consciousness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 77.
[19] *The Eton Latin Grammar*: a plain and concise introduction to the Latin language by T.W.C. Edwards.
[20] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 139.

great deal of dormant misogyny to Tom (reinforcing the astronomer's misogyny). This scene of formal instruction is crucial to Maggie's later perception of her abilities and her reading preferences. She seems to internalize the idea that women are simply not cut for learning Latin, that they can only imitate the creative energies of the Other. It is difficult not to read such passages without a side glance to Maggie's creator. Her prattle is persistent and stubborn, as even Tom admits when they grow up: "I never feel certain about anything with you. At one time you take pleasure in a sort of perverse self-denial, and at another you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong."[21] What surfaces in Tom's narrow and unjust attitude towards Maggie is that the heroine's life is "a planless riddle to him."[22] To cancel her uncontrollable desire to know, he must stop her at all costs and call her out from the "thick grove penetrable by no star" in which she is lost, as a child:

> "*Mors omnibus est communis* would have been jejune, only she liked to know the Latin; but the fortunate gentleman whom every one congratulated because he had a son "endowed with *such* a disposition" afforded her a great deal of pleasant conjecture, and she was quite lost in the "thick grove penetrable by no star," when Tom called out,—
> "Now, then, Magsie, give us the Grammar!"
> "Oh, Tom, it's such a pretty book!" she said, as she jumped out of the large arm-chair to give it him; "it's much prettier than the Dictionary. I could learn Latin very soon. I don't think it's at all hard."
> "Oh, I know what you've been doing," said Tom; "you've been reading the English at the end. Any donkey can do that."
> Tom seized the book and opened it with a determined and business-like air, as much as to say that he had a lesson to learn which no donkeys would find themselves equal to. Maggie, rather piqued, turned to the bookcases to amuse herself with puzzling out the titles."[23]

As an adult, she is again *prevented from* meeting Philip Wakem (who keeps lending her books) or thinking of him as a potential lover. In both instances, the reader cannot help but notice that it is Tom who interrupts her deep involvement with text(s) or book exchange with Philip at the Red Deeps. One could go so far as to think that to supplant a Latin maxim for the end of Maggie's life or to translate Latin schemes of knowledge into plain English would be to misread Eliot's novel as incompetently as Tom, the primary partisan of regulations and patriarchal maxims (he has Maggie swear submissiveness on the family Bible), when he misinterprets Maggie or butchers Latin in an attempt to learn it.

[21] Ibid., 441.
[22] Ibid., 401.
[23] Ibid., 165.

Tom's schoolmaster, Mr. Stelling (and the Victorian institutions he perpetuates, along the way), with all the "determination to push his way in the world,"[24] does not contradict the popular dichotomy between men, considered well versed in methods of critical thinking, and women, leaning towards frivolous, intuitive, emotional thinking. Not really a man that could show sensitivity to labeling groups, he blatantly mentions in Maggie's presence that girls "can pick up a little of everything (…) They've a great deal of superficial cleverness; but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow."[25] Mr. Stelling is, in other words, a product of his time, for the alert reader recognizes in his speech the marks of a dominant psychological theory provided, in the nineteenth-century, by the pseudoscience known as phrenology, popularized in England in the 1820s by George Combe. The human mind is, according to this theory, defined in terms of physiologically located faculties frequently called by the theory's champions organs of veneration. The skull's prominences indicate, they argued, an individual's strengths and weaknesses, as well as his emotional and intellectual abilities.

Maggie's psyche is depicted, throughout the novel, in terms that acquire new significance viewed in relation to phrenological theories and, of course, with the advantage of hindsight. Phrenology became less and less significant as the century wore on and evolutionary theory and psychological explanation gained momentum. Maggie's physiognomy (especially her head) is described as follows:

> He was one of those lads that grow everywhere in England, and at twelve or thirteen years of age look as much alike as goslings, — a lad with light-brown hair, cheeks of cream and roses, full lips, indeterminate nose and eyebrows, — a physiognomy in which it seems impossible to discern anything but the generic character to boyhood; as different as possible from poor Maggie's *phiz*, which Nature seemed to have moulded and coloured with the most decided intention.[26]

> Maggie, too, was tall now, with braided and coiled hair; she was almost as tall as Tom, though she was only thirteen; and she really looked older than he did at that moment. She had thrown off her bonnet, her heavy braids were pushed back from her *forehead*, as if it would not bear that extra load, and her young face had a strangely worn look, as her eyes turned anxiously toward the door.[27]

> So Maggie, glad of anything that would soothe her mother, and cheer their long day together, consented to the vain decoration, and showed *a queenly head* above her old frocks, steadily refusing, however, to look at herself in the glass. Mrs Tulliver liked to

[24] Ibid., 170.
[25] Ibid., 186.
[26] Ibid., 34.
[27] Ibid., 210.

> call the father's attention to Maggie's hair and other unexpected virtues, but he had a brusque reply to give.[28]

> Maggie smiled, with glistening tears, and then stooped her *tall head* to kiss the pale face that was full of pleading, timid love,—like a woman's.[29]

Eliot does not mention tangentially that Maggie wished for "books with more in them: everything she learned [at school] seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately."[30] Her hunger for learning is not empirically observed by her family or the patriarchal pedagogue Mr. Stelling. To make matters worse, Maggie catches, as a child, a glimpse of what female intellectuality and false assumptions about it entail during her visit at Mr. Stelling's home-based teaching establishment. Tom *is supposed to attend school* here (not without a high degree of uneasiness) because his father envisions him as a man of business who can outsmart lawyers by excelling in elocution (which is the same as making the interlocutor believe the speaker reads from a script, according to Mr Tulliver). Tom's father believes that extemporaneous speech must be opaque by definition, granting the uneducated no transparent allusions. For Tom to penetrate textual secrets (of course, exclusive secrets, as all are), he must acquire a bookish education that will enable him to decipher sophisticated manipulations of the linguistic code. The work of Eliot can be thought of, in this context, as an example of textual concealment of meaning for playful and didactic purposes (to enhance the pleasure of reading and to allow women to intervene in the practices of patriarchal culture as sites of change in larger historical processes). Maggie's father is easygoing and kind, but he cannot fill the emotional void created by an ineffectual mother, who embodies provincial life, together with the Dodson relatives, whose lives are led by social etiquette and petty morality. The heroine's circumstances are made even worse by a mother who cannot guide her (not even in domestic household skills or moral norms) and always favors her brother to her detriment.

In illustrating Mr. Stelling's teaching methods, Eliot, deviating from the models set by Charlotte Brontë or Charles Dickens, releases to her readers a caustic denunciation of formal, institutionalized education in the nineteenth-century, decrying the long-term consequences which can affect a child by imposing on him learning that crosses swords with his nature. This proves to be as absurd as Tom's misreading of his sister (or his Latin, by extension). In all of her novels, Eliot seems to call out the human propensity to create erroneous fictions and act on their basis. False interpretation issues again in Mr. Stelling's reductive views on women. Errors of judgement permeate his teaching delivery and the content he forces on Tom, for he is consciously aware that "it was certainly not the best thing in the world for young Tulliver's

[28] Ibid., 329.
[29] Ibid., 276.
[30] Ibid., 306.

[education]"[31] and still remains caught up in his egotistical fictions. Tom favors nature over culture and is dragged, nevertheless, into an academic establishment in which learning is obtained solely via books; this learning, as Tom realizes but cannot voice straightforwardly, focuses on the blind compliance with axiomatic systems depleted of creativity, arbitrary rules and memorization drills that eventually squelches any learner's possibility to complete complex, real-life tasks (helping his father survive financial stress). Since Tom can only derive knowledge about nature from books and the endless lists of Latin nouns designating the biosphere, renunciation comes as the only option as he *prattles* on "*Appellativa arborum … Sunt etiam volucrum … Ut Ostrea, cetus.*"[32] Maggie's renunciation comes, too, as the only option, as the text shows.

Ong's *Latin Language Study as a Renaissance Puberty Rite* (1959) indicates that the study of Latin was deeply entrenched in the cultural consciousness of the sixteenth century as an exclusively male enterprise pivoting on the Renaissance epic which eulogized male features such as bravery and strength and reinforcing the male fabric of Latin, well-known for being the origin of human knowledge practicality. Girls were trained in the vernacular only under the tutorship of their female caretakers. This medieval and Renaissance situation, Ong explains, continued long into the twentieth century, when elementary schools were still called "grammar" schools (because boys were taught beginners' Latin grammar at school). Male apprenticeship or bachelorship (the inaugural act of teaching in all its entirety) came to be associated with a rite of initiation, a journey from ignorance to tribal wit, echoed later on in history by the words *periculo facto* on diplomas (which meant "having undergone the requisite danger or trial" of the *inceptio* or the initiation into the world[33]). While boys were advised to bear hardships and come out on the top, girls were reared and educated – outside the schoolroom – to occupy their long-established place in the tranquil world of family and community intimacy. By the time women had access to Latin in schools, it had ceased being a medium of communication. In the nineteenth-century, the need to harvest aristocratic ideas of heroism and strength began to lose ground. Education needed much more practical prospects tailored to suit the needs of the bourgeoisie, which gave priority to vernacular and profit-making, technological training. Girls' intellectual efforts, in France and England, were met with no large-scale triumph. The differences between elitist, classical, male education and female training in the vernacular are laced up in the world of *The Mill on the Floss*, so poignantly marked by Eliot's Tom and Maggie.

Maggie is unable to see, at her age, the drawbacks of Mr. Stelling's educational system and only longs to be a part of it, using the same tools she employed in her reading of illustration keepsakes to ascertain Tom's schoolbooks. In instructing Tom, she indicates that lexical items such as *bonus*, which means *good*, can also mean *gift*. Such linguistic signs pervade language use and often come along metaphors and metonymies, which male

[31] Ibid., 179.
[32] Ibid., 184.
[33] Ibid., 109.

characters seem to approach literally. Maggie, however, approaches the dictionary creatively, using the same "small apparatus of shallow quickness"[34] as she did when pondering over Defoe's *History*. The "masculine" books the heroine dips into hungrily reveal to her only a half-glimpsed possibility of knowledge, through isolated words arranged in alphabetical order and their corresponding meanings which she cannot integrate into a full-grown whole. Too young to ascertain the differences between process and form, fluidity and fixity, she turns to fragmentary bits in Tom's dictionary which she perceives as a narrative with multiple items that can be dislodged from their arbitrary position, from "mysterious sentences, snatched from an unknown context — like strange horns of beasts, and leaves of unknown plants, brought from some far-off region", giving "boundless scope to her imagination" and perceived as "all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret."[35] From such snatched lexical items, she can imagine a multitude of meanings. *Bonus* means *good*, but why would *gift* be an improper synonym? Is *bonus* asynonymous? Maggie is right, indeed. These "mysterious sentences" give tremendous leeway to her imagination, as Mary Jacobus has shown, in her 1981 article, *Men of Maxims and The Mill on the Floss*, who equates the cryptic sentences Maggie puzzles over to fictional worlds or "alternative realities, transformations of the familiar into the exotic and strange."[36] In their novelty she can reclaim her authentic self and reach the gateway into women's discursive realm, until she is interrupted by Tom's dictatorial call ("Now, then, Maggie, give [me] the Grammar!"[37]), just as she is later in the narrative, at Red Deeps, forbidden to see Philip Wakem or borrow his books. Tom's intellect, however, seen by Mr. Stelling as "peculiarly impervious to etymology and demonstrations, (…) peculiarly in need of being ploughed and harrowed by these patent implements: it was his favourite metaphor, that the classics and geometry constituted that culture of the mind which prepared it for the reception of any subsequent crop"[38] is totally unfit for such alternative realities. Mr. Stelling's educational system is "as uncomfortable for Tom Tulliver as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it."[39] The bonus or the gift of Eliot's playfulness is, here, extremely detailed and penetrating, transforming the text into a "pretext" for exploring the ills of an exclusively-male institutionalized book learning system.

The time the reading heroine spends immersing herself in Tom's dictionary fascinates her. Even if the heroine is not Mr. Stelling's pupil and Latin is, according to Tom, a language which "girls couldn't learn,"[40] she is right to assume that the formal fashion of a word might be

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[34] Ibid., 187.
[35] Ibid., 184.
[36] Mary Jacobus, "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*," *Writing and Sexual Difference* 8, no. 2 (1981): 215.
[37] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 184.
[38] Ibid., 156.
[39] Ibid., 176.
[40] Ibid., 185.

different from its sense, that is, from its logical import in a given context. Texts as patterned assemblages of linguistic information need to be interpreted by readers, who bring along knowledge of the world and a perception of the methods one habitually handles to encode and decode signification. Language, by virtue of its internal potential to give birth to ambiguity, of its (sometimes) irrational conventions of usage, is an exquisite vehicle for creating playful situations through ingenuity and witty grammar. Maggie senses the playfulness, ambiguity and multiplicity at work in language, as opposed to Tom, who narrowly assumes an absolute and straightforward correspondence between words and reality. She is, in every possible sense, an attentive reflective reader making her own associations while she reads – the dictionary, Defoe's satiric attack on women or romances. This female-male reading distinction can further be exploited in terms of the narratological distinction between story (or *fabula*, as Russian Formalists called it, entailing the raw facts chained chronologically) and discourse (or *sjuzet*, involving the actual delivery of fictional facts). Maggie seems to have internalized both (via her past, childhood readings). Tom, instead, is the type of reader who cannot fill in the gaps of narrative information, nor can he disambiguate readings that lend themselves to double interpretation.[41] Maggie is the sort of reader willing to play the critical, hermeneutical game so wittingly devised by the author for a reader capable to unearth hidden, tacit rules and incidental loopholes which allow for novel, unprecedented interpretive possibilities. The secret is insisting/triumphing where others have failed, adopting the "let me see all *your* books" and "I should look inside, and see what [they are] about"[42] attitude, which is the foundation of literary criticism.

As the previous examples suggest, many more regulations were imposed on women's reading practices than on those of men. The exclusions and irregularities of young women's education are an indicator of the parameters within which men and women's life objectives were measured. Within the context of boys' upbringing and education, the values of autonomy, separation and independence – precursors to the male adult relationships and perspectives – are cultivated (by means of allowance to participate in controlled and socially-approved competitive events, for example) and historically-grounded in Western culture, as Carol Gilligan has shown in *In a Different Voice* (1982, 1993). At the same time, girls' "individuation"[43] is defined by attachment and pragmatic, tolerant attitudes towards rules. Motherhood and its correspondent joys are inherent to women, "built developmentally into

[41] Eliot's text is a literary illustration of such double intentionality: it is once a story of a woman baffled in her attempts to instruct herself and a powerful account of knowledge acquisition in a period in which mimetism is the only possibility assigned to women (historically) both in writing and in reading. As Maggie will show once she gets hold of The Imitation of Christ, there is no way out from this mimetism at work in fictional/historically-attested discourse.

[42] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 182.

[43] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982, 1993), 8.

the feminine psychic structure."[44] Women are trained psychologically for mothering via the environmental factors surrounding their upbringing and the way their own mothers mothered them, as suggested by Gilligan and Chodorow. Thus, both men and women must learn in their formative years that boys are supposed to detach themselves from caretakers and take an active role in the world (emulating the father – boys' role model), while girls ought to carry on their attachment relationships in the perimeter of their homes and receive an education that would render them fit for marriage. Such *idées reçus* are at work – manifested and thematized – in Eliot's novel, motivating the characters' characterization and the unfolding of the plot – girls with innate intellectual gifts and haphazard acquisition of knowledge (seen as excess, as deranging power) must be educated in domestic skills, while boys (even those who do not "nibble at [the] thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge"[45]) should be sent away into the world, detached from their familiar surroundings to achieve independence, in order to keep their gender-inherited distributions unmolested. In the two Tulliver children's lives, at any rate, these distributions remain, by definition, separate and compartmentalized. Death may be the only option and price of unity and consensus.

Although the media-saturated, future-oriented reader finds it difficult to unearth Eliot's intertexts and make inferences about Maggie's small library, references to what the female character reads – illustrated books, historical romances and religious texts – and how she makes her readings present in her mind are key to Eliot's narrative. The narrator is quite specific about Maggie's reading choices and makes it clear that she belongs, like all the intelligent women of her fiction, to the class of the unfortunate but truly excellent. Three main texts influence Maggie's character development and mould her relationships, wishes and desires – Daniel Defoe's *The Political History of the Devil* (1726), Anne Louise Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), along with Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* (1426). Secondary reading material – the Bible, the story of the Prodigal son, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Tom's schoolbooks and dictionary, some of Scott's novels (*Waverley*, *Ivanhoe*, *The Pirate*) and Byron's poems, as well as song lyrics from Joseph Haydn, John Gay, Vincenzo Bellini, Germain Delavigne and Eugène Scribe. Eliot invites her readers to see that Maggie employs references to other texts and applies them as a touchstone to the main intertexts that the reading character interprets. Besides pointing to the self-conscious mode of incorporating references to other readings Maggie uses, text allusions in *The Mill* reinforce the character's unconventionality and foreshadow issues of plot development: Maggie's role as an outcast within the narrow-minded society of St. Ogg's, her resistance and limitations as a disciple of patchy, unsystematic school training, the eventual faithfulness to the philosophy of renunciation and, finally, her watery death.

[44] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychology and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978), 39.
[45] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 307.

Maggie is not interested in low-brow literature or in aesthetically fascinating worlds of faerie. She yearns for what the narrator suggestively ranks as "masculine" studies[46] – Latin, geometry, logic – and hopes that such subject matters stir "real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew."[47] She merely hopes to steal a small piece of the "thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge"[48] men are granted. Thus, Eliot makes a forceful plea for women's reading for autodidactic purposes through the heroine's yearning for Lord Byron's poetry and Sir Walter Scott's historical novels. Maggie even confesses that poets and sages mean much more to her than saints and martyrs. Swept away by her hunger for learning, Maggie is haunted by a distant and unattainable mirage of going "to some great man – Walter Scott, perhaps – and tell him how wretched and how clever she was, and he would surely do something for her."[49] Real-world alterations (her father's downfall, Tom being sent away to school) in Books III and IV motivate Maggie's reading for self-instruction purposes and her actual predilection for "more":

> "Maggie's sense of loneliness, and utter privation of joy, had deepened with the brightness of advancing spring. All the favourite out-door nooks about home, which seemed to have done their part with her parents in nurturing and cherishing her, were now mixed up with the home-sadness, and gathered no smile from the sunshine. Every affection, every delight the poor child had had, was like an aching nerve to her. There was no *music* for her any more—no piano, no harmonised voices, no delicious stringed instruments, with their passionate cries of *imprisoned spirits* sending a strange vibration through her frame."[50]

Maggie's memory goes back to a past in which she ran free (and which the external reader has incorporated into a miscellaneous reading memory) and wandered along the Deeps, the Ponds, the Great Ash. The "music" of her life belongs to the child who enjoyed creating stories of her own and could tell others about her textual interpretations. To think of "imprisoned spirits" is to recollect memories of a girl who cut off her hair in defiance of her family, who refused Tom the bigger portion of her jam puff, or who threw her cousin Lucy in the mud out of jealousy and envy. The reader almost sees the Mill as her retreat and rehabilitation defense system for her harmed spirit, nourishing – *symbolically* – her creativity and desire for more out of life as she pores over books in spite of her family being scornful of her. The reader is made aware that what Maggie seeks, labels as "more" and secures from the Tullivers is the vitality of creation, the energy of life itself hidden within the pages of her books. To the Tullivers, the Mill and the Floss, with its accelerated motion and currents, function *literally* as a measure of life, with its triumphs and lost battles, with its archenemies and potential avengers, along with its

[46] Ibid., 321.
[47] Ibid., 321.
[48] Ibid., 307.
[49] Ibid., 308.
[50] Ibid., 306.

historical sediments and family generations. Maggie's formal education is hinted at briefly and depicted in deploring terms consistent with the idea that in Victorian England, girls' education was of little substantial value, focusing primarily on religious topics and morality and almost completely lacking facilities to give girls any kind of systematic training. It is astonishing, thus, to see how Maggie persisted in training herself. Of course, the knowledge of such self-made, self-improving readers[51] (lacking complete instructional material, as shown below, and curbing their creative powers, allowing for no mental comfort) was attained in far from easy ways:

> "(…) of all her *school-life* there was nothing left her now but her little collection of school-books, which she turned over with a sickening sense that she knew them all, and they were all *barren of comfort*. Even at school she had often wished for books with more in them: everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately. And now—without the indirect charm of school-emulation—Télémaque[52] was mere bran; so were the hard dry questions on Christian Doctrine: there was no flavour in them—no strength. Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies; if she could have had *all* Scott's novels and *all* Byron's poems!—then, perhaps, she might have found happiness enough to dull her sensibility to her actual daily life. And yet ... they were hardly what she wanted."[53]

The introductory chapters invoke the past and include long descriptions of the fictional river Floss as well as the interactions between Mr. Tulliver, Mrs. Tulliver, Mr. Riley and Tom. Maggie is painted as a precocious reader "seated on a low stool close by the fire, with a large book opened up on her lap (…), dreaming over her book."[54] This book is none other than Defoe's *History of the Devil*, a religious treatise tapping into the concreteness of hell. Mr. Tulliver bought *The History of the Devil* at Partridge's sale solely for its binding, we are told. Such a tome treating of the occult surely seems an unusual childhood reading choice. Defoe delves into supranatural forces in a two-part illustrated book centered on ancient and modern history. The book itself is a dialogue with Milton's *Paradise Lost*. What it does add to Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the notion that learning opportunities, etiquette, and the comfort of the upper classes have all determined the devil to refrain from magical rites and spells, which fit a more gullible era, and choose instead common procedures and institutions familiar to the lay man which do wonders for him in an age of religious, economic, educational and political doubt and accelerated change.

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[51] George Eliot was, like Maggie, a determined self-made reader, indulging in learning, in her early twenties, Latin, Greek, German, Italian, singing, piano, and even Hebrew, to be able to check on Old Testament critics.

[52] The hero of a romance written for instructional purposes by François Fénelon (1651–1715).

[53] Ibid., 306, my emphasis.

[54] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 60.

Maggie's reading of pictures – especially of the engraving *Ducking a Witch* – takes a creative spin: "I like to make stories to the pictures out of my head."[55] She wraps pictures up in vivid narratives. The heroine is no passive-observer of reading subjects. She extends her fictional being into the pictures viewed and actively takes part in her made-up stories. The illustration escorts Defoe's section on the devil's strategy to reach humankind through dream interpreters, astronomers, witches and the like. In Maggie's eyes, the witch is guilt-free. However, the blacksmith displayed by Defoe's illustration is the oppressor:

> "[T]his dreadful blacksmith with his arms akimbo, laughing—oh, isn't he ugly? — I'll tell you what he is. He's the devil *really* (…) and not a right blacksmith; for the devil takes the shape of wicked men, and walks about and sets people doing wicked things, and he's oftener in the shape of a bad man than any other, because, you know, if people saw he was the devil, and he roared at 'em, they'd run away, and he couldn't make 'em do what he pleased."[56]

Maggie's exposition propels Eliot's satirizing comments on the provincial society of St. Ogg's, which maliciously and mistakenly (again, the theme of misinterpretation is set in motion) accuses its inhabitants for being fallen. The young Maggie believes it is the innocent character who must self-sacrifice everything in order to gain a later, divine reward. One can argue that the reader's first encounter with Maggie Tulliver is shaped by the impression he or she gets from her interpretation of *The History of the Devil*, which is not a book placed accidentally in her lap. In *The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver* (1975), Nina Auerbach goes so far as to say that witchcraft can be defined around terms such as demonism and concealed sexuality and claim that, in fact, the demon-like features of Maggie Tulliver are to be found in the very idea of her womanliness. Maggie's "destructive aura", Auerbach explains, "takes shape in the associations of demonism, witchery and vampirism that surround her,"[57] and running through "the Tulliver blood."[58]

Both Maggie and Mr. Tulliver see the world in consonance with the Manichean heresy that posits the devil's active, autonomous force in the world. Throughout the novel, the heroine – "looking like a small Medusa[59] with her snakes cropped,"[60] "whirling round like a Pythoness"[61] – is repeatedly associated with witches and gypsies in her early years of isolation in the attic, with its worm-eaten floors and cobwebs. The witch motif – a recurring one in

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[55] Ibid., 18.
[56] Ibid., 62.
[57] Nina Auerbach, "The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30, no. 2 (1975): 157.
[58] Ibid., 159.
[59] Greek mythology presents Medusa as one of the three Gorgons, with snakes instead of hair and the power to turn anyone who glanced at them to stone.
[60] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 138.
[61] A priestess or soothsayer.

literature for centuries – in *The Mill* is also important, given the genesis of the novel. In the eighteenth century, rationalists refused the belief according to witch witchcraft ever existed, even if in the preceding centuries witches were indeed persecuted. Walter Scott's *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*, published in the 1830s, give the curious reader further insight into the matter, explaining the extent to which witches were both misinterpreted and mistreated. Such notions do lurk in the narrative's background, helping the external reader understand the faults of an ideological system which oppresses and persecutes its women. In *The Mill on the Floss*, however, Eliot refashions the witch motif to transform persecuted women into intellectually curious, passionate and outspoken individuals.

Maggie is only nine years old when she decides to play an imaginary game with Defoe's fictional world filled with witch-hunts, persecuted women being drowned and vivid descriptions of evil. Her alertness to the details of the illustrations speak to her intellectual precocity. In the explanatory details offered to Mr. Riley, she shows active reading skills. The heroine is able to discriminate the double-edged lethal bind of the witch's swimming test. Two implications follow – one positive and one negative. First and foremost, Defoe's text, with its criticism of Milton's representation of Satan and its blasphemous, profane tone and authority-questioning attitude, serves as a nonconformity benchmark for Maggie, thus a benchmark which she can later use to criticize Defoe himself or other textual patterns. She can borrow objective and subjective criteria for textual interpretation. This is the basis of all creative reading. To read creatively is to brace a text with personal labor and invention. Then, Defoe's *History* has its own drawbacks and dangers. Maggie risks (over)identification with negative characters, unfavorable images of womanhood – if she listens to the book's narrative voice, she must hate her own body; she must think that women are the devil's "favorite instrument."[62] Viewed in this context, Defoe's book might not be safe from misreading, especially for a nine-year-old without proper guidance. The threat of mimetic, poisonous contagion of books to vulnerable readers might turn out to be true. Eliot's novel raises, right from the beginning, the crucial question of reading, or, better said, the ethics of reading, which has remained, up until today, a major concern for writers, critics and readers alike. Lacking a guide, a mediator, a filter instrument to guide her through Defoe's moral controversies, Maggie's access to a textual repository imbued with jaundiced images of female body and intellect can severely alter her critical reading abilities.

Akin to Jane Eyre, the child Maggie undertakes reading without a guide and later gives herself up to solitary, secret reading acts (given the Tullivers' rejection of reading as occult and threatening). All her books come to her via men (Mr. Tulliver, Tom, Bob Jakin, Philip Wakem). When she offers to impart knowledge to the uneducated (at first with Luke, using *Pug's Tour of Europe*, then with the gypsies, and later with Tom), the narrator cannot abstain from commenting, ironically:

[62] Daniel Defoe, *The History of the Devil* (Boston: Dow & Jackson, 1726), 178.

> "Maggie Tulliver, you perceive, was by no means that well-trained, well-informed young person that a small female of eight or nine necessarily is in these days: she had only been to school a year at St Ogg's, and had so few books that she sometimes read the dictionary; so that in travelling over her small mind you would have found the most unexpected ignorance as well as unexpected knowledge. She could have informed you that there was such a word as "polygamy," and being also acquainted with "polysyllable," she had deduced the conclusion that "poly" meant "many;" but she had had no idea that gypsies were not well supplied with groceries, and her thoughts generally were the oddest mixture of clear-eyed acumen and blind dreams."[63]

For Maggie, too, unguided and unsupervised reading turns into a clandestine rite of passage. This marks an impasse in the external reader's mind – is Maggie as a child a reflective reader? Is – perhaps – the adult Maggie a version of the child surviving in her, in her fantasies, in her curiosity, in her capacity to be either a Freudian *daydreamer* or a Jungian *puer aeternus*, or maybe an instance of Bachelard's *naïve rêveur*? Jane Eyre's readerly capacities have already shown that real chronological age is irrelevant when it comes to reflective, active reading. Thus, the question remains: is the adult Maggie an elderly representation of her younger self, reading other print material for purposes of retrospective fantasizing into childhood, for the pleasure of regaining mastery over naivete innocence threatened by oblivion? Unfortunately, Maggie, as an adult, will refuse romance plots and stubbornly resist book endings (and by extension, auctorial intentions) because she suspects finding in them a linearity of reading which she cannot accept, as it does not go hand in hand with her training in the vernacular.). Gratification is not delayed and learning the story's outcome never postponed. In a child-like manner, Maggie protests at the change in content which she does not agree with, because the romance content (in *Corinne* or in Scott's novels) would make her renounce the vernacular training she is used to and would upset her brother's beliefs and the status quo in gender relations.[64] This might be a reflection of what Freud called the "compulsion to repeat" or, perhaps just as better, what Donald Winnicott, in *Playing and Reality* (1971) has named a "transitional object" – "a need for a specific object or a behaviour pattern that started at a very early date may reappear at a later age when deprivation threatens,"[65] that is, reading or books in Maggie's case – an object that the child attaches himself to and holds tightly onto in order to protect himself from the fear of rejection (e.g., from Tom, her mother, the Dodsons and the

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[63] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 150.

[64] In *Corinne* (1807), Anne-Loise-Germaine Necker, baronne de Staël-Holstein – better known as Madame de Staël – argued that genius transcends gender distinctions and has both female as well as male traits. In her day, the world of feeling was considered the exclusive preserve of women. By contrast, de Staël equated feeling with a love of beauty, an elevated spirit and passionate commitment, which can only aid genius, not hinder it.

[65] Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 4.

Pullets, the society of St. Ogg's) or abandonment. At many levels, Maggie remains a child caught between curiosity and desire to experience "more", hungry for books of masculine knowledge.

After Mr. Tulliver's financial downfall, when the adolescent Maggie comes downstairs for the first time, she learns that in "the place where the bookcase had hung; there was nothing now but the oblong faded space on the wall, and below it the small table with the Bible and the few other books."[66] She shouts, "Where are the books? I thought my uncle Glegg said he would buy them."[67] To her despair, Tom answers with reckless indifference, "Why should they buy many books when they bought so little furniture?"[68] Maggie's indifference to rational book-furniture proportions and her need for escape make one wonder what she might have become or do with an unrestricted set of books. Bob Jakin provides Maggie with another bundle of miscellaneous books – *Beauties of the Spectator*, *Rasselas*, *Economy of Human Life*, *Letters on the Evidences*, *Doctrines, and Duties of the Christian Religion*, along with Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. The last book on the list exerts the most powerful impact on Maggie's life and reading practices. Her fictional imitation of Christ may be the sacrifice she engenders by refusing to marry Stephen and, according to Defoe's narrative paralleling the main text, the predestination of her downfall as an intelligent woman in provincial England and, consequently, the victory of the "men of maxims."

The protagonist's death may not be, after all, the worst-case scenario. As an unmarried young woman, Maggie had few choices at her disposal; thus, her devotion to religious books indicates the possibility of another narrative denouement. In the mid-nineteenth century, there was a common misconception regarding the existence of an "excess" of unmarried women threatening to fall prey to illicit relations. Spinsterhood was a valid option. Maggie is no Isabel Archer and no Becky Sharp. She could have only ended up as a Sister in a Victorian Sisterhood, following a religious vocation. The other man supplying Maggie with books, Philip Wakem, saw the danger stalking Maggie in her embrace of a philosophy of renunciation and her misreading of ascetism. Let us not forget that *The Mill on the Floss* is the most autobiographical of its author's writings. When Eliot brings about her heroine's death, she is by and large bringing herself a longed-for release from limitations, killing off a part of herself, her own conflictual childhood readings, by exposing and exorcizing them in the novel. Goethe had similarly inflicted his own emotional ordeals on Werther, then let him die, in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), a work with which Eliot might have been familiar. Maggie's reading of Corinne is also prescient, in many ways, of her eventual downfall. Similarly, Corinne, well-versed in Italian Renaissance, fails her identitary quest and dies.

The adolescent Maggie, "with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery"[69] fills her vacant hours with Latin, Euclid and Logic, which soon leave her ungratified and provide no

[66] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 268.
[67] Ibid., 265.
[68] Ibid., 265.
[69] Ibid., 307.

answer to her questions, making her "[rebel] against her lot."[70] After her "masculine" mental diet, she takes on Thomas à Kempis' fifteenth-century text, *The Imitation of Christ*, a religiously-oriented text meant to be read spiritually, meditatively, allegorically and, therefore, with the utmost attention. It may not involve daydreaming and such mental activities of fantasizing, but it includes various possibilities of misreading. Maggie assimilates the new-found morality of submission and renunciation as an adapted version of Tom's matter-of-fact constrictions. *The Imitation of Christ* is based on the Bible and consists on a composite version of the Psalms and quotations from the Epistles and the Gospels. Maggie's zealous reading of *The Imitation of Christ* in Book Four masterfully mirrors Tom's earlier misreading of Latin syntax and maxims. There is a wide gap opening between reading and interpretation in both scenes. The same gap between reading and interpretation widens in Eliot's *Romola*, when Romola explores the text of Savonarola's confession interpretively. Likewise, Dorothea in *Middlemarch* shortsightedly mistakens Casaubon's *labor limae* for fruitful research. Daniel Deronda, similarly, in Eliot's last novel, is ready to fulfill his imposing destiny in the East by acquainting himself with memorials in Charisi's trunk. In Maggie's case, the fifteenth-century voice from the past guides her on her path to humility and renunciation, encouraging an inward movement towards interiority where only pure contemplation and self-sacrifice are spiritually-rewarding. The flesh, the senses, the intellect, argumentation, speculation and earthly pleasure are condemned by à Kempis.

Victorian readers of a highly religious temperament would often shun the superficial, the frivolous and the transitory, conspicuously devoting themselves to the Good Book and the Book of Common Prayer. It is no wonder, then, that her subsequent reading practices resist auctorial intentions. It seems like the Word speaks to her directly. How are religious books taken into the Victorian reader's system? First of all, by hearing the same reading material being repeated on and on at church on Sundays (especially in rural communities like St Ogg's) and through private consequent rereadings of the Bible at home. Secondly, through rote memorization, a central tenet of nineteenth-century reading practices (a practice which pervaded the past centuries, being much prized to this day). Can one equate learning by rote with comprehension? Yes, Bible language permeated nineteenth-century British culture. It also seeped into the individual believer's vocabulary and consciousness. It could not impede the lay believer, however, from endowing the religious text with magical features. It did not, alas, impeded itinerant preachers from using divination to conduct their lives. The religious language of the past, Eliot shows, has a great influence on the language nineteenth-century people use to think their thoughts and voice them.

During her three-year Thomas à Kempis seclusion, Maggie does take pleasure in walking outdoors. During one of these walks, Philip Wakem, her brother's schoolmate and the son of her father's enemy, tempts her with books – nineteenth-century romances such as Mme. De Staël's *Corinne* and Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, *The Pirate* and *Ivanhoe*. Through the physically-deformed character of Philip Wakem, Eliot endorses a positive representation of

[70] Ibid., 308.

masculine teaching, learning and readerly interpretation. He is an art enthusiast and describes himself as a lover of painting, music, classic literature, medieval and modern literature. His aesthetic sensibility transcends his physical weakness. He also possesses a feminine sensitivity, as he had "some of the woman's intolerant repulsion towards worldliness and the deliberate pursuit of sensual enjoyment."[71] Both Philip and Maggie are a stand-in for culture and literary sensibility in the novel. They engage in lively discussions while he imagines her as a Hamadryad,[72] "dark and strong and noble, just issued from one of the fir trees, when the stems are casting their afternoon shadows on the grass."[73] Akin to Jane Eyre's Bessie, Philip retells old legends and myths from *The Iliad and The Odyssey*, taking great pleasure in the narration and emphasizing intellect and heroism to the detriment of physical strength through mythological figures such as Philoctetes, which makes Maggie wonder whether Philoctetes had a sister who cared for him (again, placing a great importance on Tom's life and affection). In this context, Maggie finds the cultural mediator she lacked in her childhood – the critic able to filter her interpretations, the book purveyor capable of granting Maggie with books having "more" in them. Perhaps it is with Philip that Maggie feels she is part of a textual community, which is of special importance in considerations of female literacy. Since medieval times, women have depended on a person – a man, usually, a chaplain or adviser – to mediate the meanings of texts (reading texts to or translating and digesting them for women) and increase their access to books. However, having internalized the Tulliver's narrow solipsism, à Kempis' philosophy of inaction and interiority and Defoe's satiric attack on women, she can no longer allow Philip to guide her, as she rejects reading the secular romances whole.

Philip would have granted Maggie, through post-reading discussions and ease of access to new texts, new horizons of reading, in Hans-Georg Gadamer's terms. According to Gadamer, the hermeneutic process consists of three moments or stages – *intelligere* or *subtilitas intelligendi* (which Jauss calls *aesthetic comprehension*), *interpretare* or *subtilitas explicandi* (which, again, according to Jauss, stands for reconstruction) and *applicare* or *subtilitas applicandi* (seen by Jauss as reader-awareness).[74] Maggie manages to get past the first stage – *intelligere* – which encompasses the understanding of a literary work. However, since she refuses to read the secular romances Philip provides in their entirety, she cannot ascertain the meaning of the separate parts of the work in light of the whole (the second stage), let alone be aware of the different meanings her readings have been given throughout the history of their reception (the third stage). One could substitute these three stages with the dichotomy between a perceptual reading and a critically reflective reading. It goes without

[71] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 347.

[72] Greek mythology presents Hamadryads as nymphs of trees, believed to perish along with the trees in which they had lived.

[73] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 343.

[74] Both Hans Robert Jauss' *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics* (1982), *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982) and Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1988) deal with the controversial differences between reading and interpretation.

saying, Maggie cannot acquire the latter as long as she listens to à Kempis' admonitions to give up worldly pleasure (= reading for pleasure) and fears that such literature would "make [her] in love with this world again, as [she] used to be."[75]

As I have briefly indicated in a previously published paper, *The Reading Practices of George Eliot's Fictional Women* (44), in Book V, Maggie comes into contact with a premonitory tome – Mme. De Staël's *Corinne* – which echoes the romantic pseudo-competition between her and Lucy Deane, between the dark-haired and the fair-haired heroine, respectively. Like Maggie, Corinne possesses a steady conviction of the importance of books as enduring cultural monuments, along with art and architecture. Corinne's stepmother is also a reticent woman suspicious of the imagination and the senses. She finds herself, after her father's death, in a difficult position for a young Englishwoman who cannot accommodate to the traditional values of the British society. She is drawn to a sensuous mindset and intense religious aspirations, both of which are acknowledged by Oswald. Maggie identifies with Corinne, for she is dark-haired, and thinks Corinne's chances at a happy ending next to Lord Oswald Nelvil are doomed from the start. She sympathizes with weak, unhappy protagonists, whose *nemesis* she dreads. Her incomplete reading process and resistance to endings – whether it's Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* or the novels of Sir Walter Scott and de Staël – are certain to have caused her inability to confront the real world. Eliot seems to concede that incomplete reading acts add up to the unfulfilled transformative potential of fiction. By choosing not to read the endings, Maggie preserves the yet-to-be of the character's lives. Of hers, as well.

3. Reading as a form of passive-aggressive participation

Through Maggie's phobia of book endings, Eliot may had written into the novel her own fears of aesthetic closure. Eliot's female reader seems oblivious to the remarkable attributes of the dark-haired heroines: in *Corinne*, Corinne is a strong-willed woman as compared to the obedient Lucile; in *Waverley*, Flora MacIvor's political interests supersede her romantic views; in *Ivanhoe*, Rebecca vigorously manages to demonstrate her innocence and fight for her life, although she represses her love; in *The Pirate*, Minna gives up Cleveland to protect her integrity and preserve her moral principles intact. Maggie has a penchant for reading fiction, but flees from it, too, unconsciously recognizing its dormant status, its potential to become reality. Her encounters with Philip Wakem (Tom's schoolmate and the son of Mr. Tulliver's enemy) at the Red Deeps are kept in deepest secrecy. The highly sensitive Philip, in spite of his psychological suffering due to his 'deformity' – his hunched back – is well-read and widely exposed to culture. He urges Maggie to read and provides her with reading material. She refuses to read the endings or returns books unread:

[75] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 324.

> "Take back your Corinne," said Maggie, drawing a book from under her shawl. "You were right in telling me she would do me no good; but you were wrong in thinking I should wish to be like her."
> "Wouldn't you really like to be a tenth Muse, then, Maggie?" said Philip looking up in her face as we look at a first parting in the clouds that promises us a bright heaven once more.
> "Not at all," said Maggie, laughing. "The Muses were uncomfortable goddesses, I think, – obliged always to carry rolls and musical instruments about with them. If I carried a harp in this climate, you know, I must have a green baize cover for it; and I should be sure to leave it behind me by mistake."
> "You agree with me in not liking Corinne, then?"
> "I didn't finish the book," said Maggie. "As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further. I foresaw that that light-complexioned girl would win away all the love from Corinne and make her miserable. I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones. Since you are my tutor, you ought to preserve my mind from prejudices; you are always arguing against prejudices."
> "Well, perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St Ogg's at her feet now; and you have only to shine upon him—your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams."
> "Philip, that is not pretty of you, to apply my nonsense to anything real," said Maggie, looking hurt. (…)
> "Maggie," said Philip, with surprise, "it is not like you to take playfulness literally. You must have been in St Ogg's this morning, and brought away a slight infection of dulness."
> "Well," said Maggie, smiling, "if you meant that for a joke, it was a poor one; but I thought it was a very good reproof. I thought you wanted to remind me that I am vain, and wish every one to admire me most. But it isn't for that that I'm jealous for the dark women, – not because I'm dark myself; it's because I always care the most about the unhappy people. If the blond girl were forsaken, I should like her best. I always take the side of the rejected lover in the stories."[76]

As a result, Maggie's reading is fragmentary, resistant to auctorial intentions. To sustain her interest, she requires texts which she can remodel to fit her expectations. Why does Eliot allow her female character to incorporate references to other texts? Is it, I wonder, because she wants her readers to see reading as part of a larger cultural environment? Or maybe because she wants them to consolidate the impression that Maggie and the narrator share the same values? In each case, Maggie's comments on the status of texts implies a good familiarity with long-established conventions in terms of narrative form and contemporary reader-response. Eliot's female readers are always alert to the implications of their own reading practices,

[76] Ibid., 371.

always aware of their own expectations regarding print matter, constantly filling spaces within texts which open up possibilities. Maggie and Philip's 'book-club' meetings touch on the issue of shared subjectivity in nineteenth-century Britain. Isn't this proof that the heroine reads under the illusion that she is part of a cultural milieu from which similar heroines are drawn and literary conventions shared freely? The above passage shows Maggie Tulliver undertaking reading as a form of passive-aggressive participation, as an act of literary appropriation which forges links between solitary and collective reading, between the *scriptorial* versus the *lectorial* functions women could adopt in the Victorian era. I would argue, borrowing Julia Kristeva's critical apparatus and her ideas published in Séméiotiké in 1969, that reading is a form of passive aggressive participation in *The Mill on the Floss*, where Maggie "inescapably strives to incorporate the quotation into the unified textuality which makes the text a semiotic unit."[77] Inevitably, fragmentary reading ensues. Seen in this way, Maggie's references to Scott's novels are metaphors which engage her in interpretation. Significance is constructed not in a passive but a highly active way, that disrupts literary chronology and the authority of her readings' scribe.

Maggie reads historical romances as if they were moral tales, retaining only their hints at the conflict between dark-haired heroines (whose discursive agency would lead her to social opprobrium) and fair-haired heroines (whose passivity and submission is happily embraced by the community of St. Ogg's and the Victorian society at large). Thus, she reads *Corinne* as simply a romance in which the fair-haired heroine triumphs and completely overlooks the characteristics of the titular heroine, her artistic abilities or her impressive firmness (focusing completely on Lucile, the submissive female character). Rebecca and Flora MacIvor, as well as Minna, are seen to lose out to other fair-haired heroines, too (e.g., Rowena). Maggie misreads *The Pirate*, since Minna has no fair-haired competitor and gives up Cleveland on moral grounds (because she cannot get past the pirate's past, adopting the same philosophy of renunciation embraced by Maggie). Such issues bring about real-life consequences which are less harmless than one would assume: she refuses the marriage plot in her life. Her religious euphoria may as well be interpreted as a case of female Quixotism, that is, of the naïve misreading and mistranslation into real-life, of a religiously idealistic-heroic text.

Maggie's refusal to conform to the marriage-plot in her own life and the imitation of à Kempis' texts emerges in her decision not to marry Stephen Guest, not to live with her mom or with Aunt Glegg and not to leave St. Ogg's (but to leave on her own and seek employment). After her refusal to accept marrying Stephen Guest, he even bursts out: "Good God, Maggie! … you rave. How can you go back without marrying me? You don't know what will be said, dearest. You see nothing as it really is."[78] The involved reader of devotional works based on Biblical imagery is provided with two variations on the theme of archetypal initiation: the quest for salvation and the test. The reader may never even become aware of the initiatory dimension of his or her reading. Biblical texts can provide the reader with rich and inherently

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[77] Judith Still, and Michael Worton. "Introduction." in *Intertextuality: Theories and practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 11.
[78] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 480.

ambiguous imagery of a heavenly home (as do castles in chivalric books, the source of Quixote's misreadings), all sorts of tests, symbolic imprisonments and dangerous disillusionments created by evil forces. Apart from its role in unsupervised daydreaming, such imagery could also function for purposes of contemplation on morally-religious problems. For Maggie, it functions as a filter: she renounces bad books, the enticements of worldly life, and turns to good books.

4. Conclusions

Maggie's spiritual reading practice constitutes what Michel de Certeau called "la lecture absolue" or absolute reading – an orthodox literality in reading. Maggie used this "cultural weapon, a private hunting reserve"[79] that makes her other (equally legitimate) readings heretical (romances seen as inconsistent with the values à Kempis' text proposed) or insignificant (for instance, other reading material Bob Jakin offers Maggie). Thus, the book that most ardently works on Maggie is Thomas à Kempis's Imitation. She draws from it a narrow philosophy of renunciation and self-sacrifice and learns from it that she is subjugated by "larger wants than others seemed to feel"[80] and yearns for "that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth."[81] Having to deal with her father's financial and mental downfall, her unreciprocated love for Tom and the intolerant and shallow world of St. Ogg's, Maggie turns into Thomas à Kempis's unassertive disciple. She submits à Kempis's devotional work to literal reading and literal understanding, responding mechanically and imitatively to its credo – simplicity over and illusions of grandeur, the spirit of God over man-made material security. Thomas à Kempis's devotional treatise is consistent with Maggie's large heartedness and self-sacrificing nature, but leads her, unfortunately, to a self-imposed renunciation of books and other intellectual pursuits. Of all the books read by Maggie, she is most under the influence of à Kempis's teachings, allowing "the old book she had long ago learned by heart"[82] to manage her future.

Intertextual references pervade Eliot's novel, foreshadowing the narrative ending so feared by Maggie. The novel does achieve closure – Maggie's drowning is compensated diegetically by the birth of Bob Jakin's daughter (another Maggie, with new interpretive possibilities at her disposal), paralleling, again, the plot of Corinne, in which Corinne's death is followed by the birth of Juliette, a dark-haired child whose creative talents Corinne nourishes before her death. Maggie's fear of the end-result of fiction is materialized – her own unfinished life, which she can no longer reshape and reinterpret, becomes interspersed with the birth of other characters. The ending of the novel endorses, in a way, a warning – books that are not

[79] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 171.
[80] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 322.
[81] Ibid., 323.
[82] Ibid., 581.

read in entirety, with all their premonitory and instructional devices, impede actual learning and critical reading, which may be postponed indefinitely. There is an aesthetic link that chains a literary work in relation to its first, its second, its nth reading. This aesthetic consensus is broken whenever readers like Maggie interrupt and impede self-instruction by refusing certain plots and genres. This aesthetic consensus, based on the core reading habits formed in formal instructional settings in contact with the classics of literature and reinforced through self-improving efforts, tends to grant further readings a linearity (ideally uninterrupted by other characters – such as Tom, or oneself, as Maggie does with her unfinished historical romances), an idealized version of reading acts. Both departing from this ideal (as Maggie does) or adhering to it (as nineteenth-century enlightened educational standards require) can prove dangerous. For Maggie to have become and remained a critical reader, she was supposed to reconcile two types of texts – essentially biblical and Puritan stories and secular ones – and find in "profane" reading options examples of providential grace and paths to salvation, and in religious options positive images of womanhood. A primarily religious/secular mode of thought often sternly censors and dismisses alternative print material.

The reading habits of Maggie Tulliver, an intellectually insatious reader exposed, from an early age, to books perceived by others as having a debilitating effect on a woman's mind, have been closely examined thus far. The conclusions are not cheering: Maggie's texts – Daniel Defoe's *The History of the Devil*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Walter Scott's novels, Madame de Staël's *Corinne, or Italy* and Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* – certainly show her as a passive-aggressive precocious reader, as her own creator was, especially in her reading Milton's poetry. The present study has tried to provide an aswer to the question of whether reading can offer women a path to liberation. It did so by teasing the tension between fiction that exhausts women's intellectual energy and fiction that sets it loose. Since Maggie is doubly bound to both types, she dies a religious reader, but also a reconfigured Miltonic hero rescuing her brother, Tom, from the flood. George Eliot's precocious female reader argues for the existence of two types of texts in the nineteenth-century – texts that offer opportunities for identification with passionate, intelligent and idealistic heroines and texts that offer an out-of-this-world ascetism confining women to nun-like solitude.