

**Carolyn Burdett, “Sexual Selection, Automata and Ethics in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* and Olive Schreiner’s *Undine* and *From Man to Man*.” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14.1 (2009): 26-52**

Studies of science and literature continually return to George Eliot’s works as primary examples of the intersection between Darwin’s view of evolution and Victorian literature. Analysis of Eliot’s work appear in some of the most important texts in literature and science studies, most notably Gillian Beer’s seminal work *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) and Sally Shuttleworth’s *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* (1984). It is difficult to find new ways to approach a text like *The Mill on the Floss* through the lens of Darwinian theory, yet Carolyn Burdett manages to do just that by moving away from just a Darwinian reading of the novel, and instead incorporating contemporary theories of automata (most notably T.H. Huxley’s work) as a bridge between Eliot and Olive Schreiner.

Burdett anchors her article around the notion that Eliot and Schreiner’s “capacity for working and reworking, for creating resisting spaces with the new biological and psychological languages” (46) reflects a more complex view of how women writers reconciled science with ethics. Burdett covers some familiar ground with her discussion of Eliot’s anticipation of Darwin’s theory of sexual selection in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), particularly with regard to Maggie Tulliver’s assertive approach to mate selection. While Stephen Guest follows the traditional path of finding “quite the right sort of wife” (32) in *Lucy Deane*, Maggie defies this form of sexual selection by denying her attraction to Stephen, her obvious biological mate, reflecting Eliot’s favoring of free will and social conditioning over biological determinism. The social imperative, as argued by Darwin in *The Descent of Man* (1871) (notably after the publication of Eliot’s novel), is both moral and a product of natural selection. Burdett argues this social imperative leads to the conflict between Maggie’s “automatic” attraction to Stephen and her “automatic” rejection of him, which again suggests how Eliot anticipated scientific theory, in this case Huxley’s 1874 “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata, and its History” (37).

The remainder of Burdett’s article focuses on Schreiner’s two unfinished works, *Undine* (1928) and *From Man to Man* (1926). The connection to *The Mill on the Floss* is difficult to ascertain at times, and Burdett requires the reader to make some inductive leaps. For instance, she focuses on the overt religiosity in *Undine* in relation to her rejection of biological determinism, but does not make the connection to Eliot’s work. This is not to suggest that Burdett’s analysis of Schreiner’s novels is without merit – discussion of these underappreciated texts is praiseworthy enough, however it is her consideration of Schreiner’s feminist response to automata sexual selection that offers the greatest insight. Burdett argues beyond a eugenic reading of the texts and instead considers “what *Undine* cannot do, at any point, is to integrate her intellectual response with her emotional-sexual life” (44). *Undine* acts as an automaton with her approach to religion and love, both of which fail her because, as Burdett argues, Schreiner’s view of sexual selection goes beyond the physical. In *From Man to Man*, Rebekah views human evolution as “love and the expansion of ego to others,” (46) which is more complex than both Darwin’s sexual selection and Huxley’s automata.

Burdett concludes by suggesting that in these novels automatic sexuality (the traditional view of sexual selection) fails because “sociality is [human beings’] condition, it is the fabric of the environment in which they exist and evolve – there must be an expansive affective life for there to be human and social flourishing” (46). Burdett hints that women writers presented this altered view of sexual selection because of the “peculiarly heavy burden for women of biological determinism” (47) which still persists today. This statement encourages more discussion and evaluation than closure, and begs for more evidence from these texts and others. Indeed, it could be argued that Burdett’s aims are too ambitious: sexual selection, automata, social and ethical evolution, and the role of woman and woman writer – anchored by three texts – are almost overwhelming for one article. This is not to suggest that her evidence is incomplete or unconvincing – her argument regarding both authors’ consideration of sexual selection in courtship and romance plots is sound and well-considered. Burdett offers us much to consider in terms of sexual selection and sociality, and despite some of its flaws, the article encourages further discussion of science and literature in the works of women writers.

Amanda Mordavsky Caleb  
University of Tennessee