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**The Rival Afterlives of George Eliot in Textual and Visual Culture: A Bicentenary Reflection**

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**Abstract**

George Eliot (1819-1880) received markedly less national and international acknowledgement during the bicentenary of her birth in 2019 than Charles Dickens did for his bicentenary in 2012. In seeking to understand why, this article conducts a comparative evaluation of Eliot and Dickens in textual and visual media to examine how and where enduring authorial celebrity is constructed. Using Google Books Ngrams, the presence of Dickens and Eliot in textual culture from the 1800s to 2000 is assessed. Eliot is found to keep pace with and/or supersede Dickens in this mass digital repository, a fact which sits at odds with her secondary position in 21st century popular culture. The online catalogue of the British Film Institute Reuben Library discloses that adaptations of Eliot’s work in film and TV are vastly outnumbered by those of Dickens. We argue that this disparity between Eliot’s textual and visual legacies can be traced to extrinsic factors relating to the idea of celebrity and the posthumous management of her reputation, combined with the robust afterlife of nineteenth century insults about her appearance. At the same time, the intrinsic qualities of her works delimit their easy remediation into in mass visual culture. Despite this, our methods of distant reading Eliot’s vibrant afterlife in mass textual repositories open up new avenues for exploring her legacy beyond the bicentenary.

**KEYWORDS**: George Eliot; celebrity; author heritage; memorialization; bicentenary; Charles Dickens; popular culture; adaptation; digital humanities.

**The Rival Afterlives of George Eliot in Textual and Visual Culture: A Bicentenary Reflection**

What can the celebration of George Eliot’s bicentenary in 2019 tell us about the changing influence of her work over the last two hundred years? At the time of her death in 1880 Eliot occupied a pre-eminent position in British literary and cultural life. The 1918 centenary was, as Margaret Harris’s research has documented, marked in consequence by mass participatory events in her native North Warwickshire, as well as formal commemoration in London. (Harris 2007, 32-48); and in 1980, the centenary of her death was marked by the final achievement of a memorial stone at Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey.

During the bicentenary of her birth in 2019 a range of activities took place to mark the anniversary, but they failed to match the national and international acknowledgement afforded Dickens in 2012. Dickens serves as a counterpoint throughout this article in part because the wealth of scholarship on his enduring currency and commemoration in popular and national cultures gives us a critical frame through which to view the very different fortunes of Eliot. But in more practical terms, the potential sites of commemoration for both Dickens and Eliot - in the London of their professional careers, and in their provincial birthplaces, in Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey and in the holdings of major cultural institutions – are so close as to make for a direct comparator. For both Eliot and Dickens, too, the identification of the author with a distinctive place – Dickensian London and Eliot’s Midlands - has been crucial to how their life and work is transmitted to the wider public in exhibitions, museums, and documentary media (Easley 2011, 63-8; John 2010, 249-60).

While the events that marked the two bicentenaries had much in common, there were significant differences in scale, national endorsement and in public profile, notably in film and TV. In this article we explore the determinates of Eliot’s relatively muted celebration in 2019. New digital tools for examining her traces in a mass literary corpus enable us to identify where Eliot’s reputation has remained strong. Our data analysis, visualized in a series of Google Ngrams, makes for a sharp contrast in terms of her enduring presence in print, in comparison to a relative lack of reference to Eliot and her works in the sphere of film and TV. We argue that this unexpected pattern of literary endurance and popular cultural amnesia can be traced back to three forces that have shaped Eliot’s afterlives since her death: first, the effects of her reputation and the management of her image at the dawn of literary celebrity; second, the extent to which the intrinsic qualities of her works delimit their easy remediation into new cultural forms, in stark contrast to the work of Dickens; and third Eliot’s own resistance to visual commodification which created a vacuum in which flourished a negative memorialization of her based on her appearance.

1. **Tracking the Bicentenaries: Eliot (2019) vs Dickens (2012)**

Eliot’s bicentenary was marked with an international conference, radio programming and a range of literary events in the UK, focusing in particular on London, Nuneaton and Coventry.[[1]](#endnote-1) In addition to several academic conferences, The Royal Society of Literature, in partnership with the British Library, and the Institute of English Studies (University of London) hostedevents which brought together writers, academics, actors, (and at the IES event) descendants of the George Eliot and G. H. Lewes families to discuss Eliot’s personal, literary and cultural significance. Speakers included Andrew Davies on adapting George Eliot for television and Gabriel Woolf on adapting Eliot for public reading.[[2]](#endnote-2) The National Portrait Gallery displayed portraits of Eliot from its collection and hosted a lecture by Eliot biographer, Rosemary Ashton.[[3]](#endnote-3) Eliot bicentenary activities were listed on a dedicated “GE 2019” website (https://georgeeliot2019.com/) under the combined auspices of the George Eliot Fellowship, the Alliance of Literary Societies, the Orange Planet and Sudden Impulse Theatre Companies, the Landmark Trust, and the universities of Loughborough and Geneva. In addition a University of Nebraska project led by Beverley Rilett, digitized the George Eliot Fellowship’s journal, the *George Eliot Review*, for the first time, as well as collating other Eliot primary source material online (https://georgeeliotarchive.org).

Displays and exhibitions in London, Coventry and Nuneaton marked the bicentenary alongside customary annual commemorations led by the George Eliot Fellowship, including wreath-layings in Nuneaton and Westminster Abbey. The British Library marked the bicentenary with a display of five items in the John Ritblat Treasures Gallery, including bound manuscript volumes of *Middlemarch* and *The Mill on the Floss* and loaned a second manuscript volume of Middlemarch for display at The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry for the “Exploring Eliot’s Coventry” exhibition which transferred to Nuneaton Museum in 2020. “George Eliot Revealed” and “Scenes of George Eliot Country” at Nuneaton Library and Nuneaton Museumrespectively**,** displayed unique, rarely seen items.

BBC Radio 4 and Radio 3 built on the bicentenary in programming across the year, with an intense burst of commissioning for November 2019. BBC Radio Four devoted an episode of “Open Country” to George Eliot Country; Melvyn Bragg hosted a *Middlemarch* episode of the flagship history of ideas programme, “In Our Time”, in which he explored the novel with academics and Eliot biographers;[[4]](#endnote-4) “George Eliot: A Life in Five Characters”[[5]](#endnote-5) examined Eliot through five of her iconic characters; and a new twelve-part adaptation of *Middlemarch* by Katie Hims, formed part of the BBC’s multi-channel “100 Novels That Shaped Our World” series. BBC Radio Three explored Eliot through music and used the new affordances of podcasting to record and profile two new episodes of “Free Thinking” trailed on BBC Sounds.[[6]](#endnote-6) One reassessed *The Mill on the Floss* with academics and writers; another explored new Eliot scholarship focusing on the present authors’ work on an AHRC funded project on provincialism and the nineteenth century novel.[[7]](#endnote-7) This audibility of Eliot across the airwaves makes for a sharp contrast with other broadcast media. With one notable exception (Gillian Wearing’s film, “Everything is Connected: George Eliot’s Life”), Eliot was wholly absent from film and TV during her bicentenary.

Comparing Eliot’s bicentenary with that of Dickens in 2012 makes clear that Eliot received far less formal recognition and backing at national and international level, which, without other evidence, might lead one to suppose that she must now be a figure of secondary importance in British culture. The differences between the two bicentenaries are differences of scale and endorsement. Dickens 200th birthday was celebrated globally. The British Council organized an international 24-hour global Dickens readathon in which 24 countries participated. The readathon was one of more than 100 British Council events which took place across fifty countries commemorating Dickens's influence.[[8]](#endnote-8) While both bicentenaries were marked with wreath-layings and church ceremonies at Westminster Abbey and in the author’s respective hometowns of Portsmouth and Nuneaton, only Dickens’ received royal acknowledgement. A royal reception was hosted at the Charles Dickens Museum and at the Westminster Abbey ceremony, Prince Charles acknowledged Dickens’ national importance: “Charles Dickens remains one of the greatest writers of the English language” (Charles Dickens: Prince Charles Leads Tributes 2012). The Archbishop of Canterbury highlighted Dickens’s moral outrage at the conditions of the poor; the BBC issued a Bicentenary Box Set of Dickens adaptations and Google gave Dickens a digital nod of recognition with a bespoke Google doodle on his 200th birthday, featuring a crowd scene of his iconic characters.[[9]](#endnote-9) The 2012 Dickens conference was an international “Four Cities” affair involving **Paris, London, Condette and Rochester with a summer conference in Lowell, Massachusetts sponsored** by French, British, and American cultural associations. Major new exhibitions in London were staged at the British Library and the Museum of London.[[10]](#endnote-10) The British Film Institute (BFI) ran a three-month season showcasing the whole history of Dickens film and TV adaptations. The Royal Mint struck a £2 Dickens coin, and the House of Commons hosted a reception to launch the “What the Dickens?” educational programme about the importance of copyright.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The institutions of church, state and national culture therefore collectively acknowledged Dickens’s importance. Adrian Wootton, Co-director of Dickens 2012 and Chief Executive of Film London, described Dickens as “A true national treasure” (qtd. in Film London Dickens 2012) Dr Florian Schweizer, Co-director of Dickens 2012 and subsequent Director of the Charles Dickens Museum reaffirmed that, “Internationally Dickens continues to be one of the finest ambassadors for British culture” (qtd. in Film London 2012). All in all, the scale and diversity of celebrations in 2012 tended to affirm Juliet John’s prescient analysis of Dickens and mass culture first published in 2010. Dickens’s own “heritage aesthetic”, John contends, makes for a particularly easy slide between the Dickensian, the “Victorian” and Englishness: a globally recognizable heritage brand (John 2010, 250). The projection of a mass readership within the forms of his writing, John argues, is key to understanding Dickens’s enduring international visibility and popularity across many forms of media.

The difference in scale between the national backing of Dickens as an international ambassador for British culture in 2012 and the more muted fanfare for Eliot’s bicentenary in 2019 might lead one to suppose that Eliot had fallen from her nineteenth century position of cultural pre-eminence to become a secondary figure in British literary culture across the course of the twentieth century and beyond. Comparing the textual legacy of Eliot and Dickens in mass digitized corpora using Google Books Ngrams however offers a very different perspective. Our use of this digital tool and a combination of distant with close reading enables us to refine a new set of questions about fame, celebrity, and literary endurance. As we shall see, changing methods requires us not only to track the authors’ presence over time, but also through different media. It is no longer enough to ask *when* Eliot was famous and why she is less so now; rather we come to see it is a matter of identifying *where* she continues to be present and where she never quite gained a toehold, before we begin to open up the question of why this is so.

1. **Enduring Eliot: Finding Fame in Google Books**

In 2011 in an article in the journal *Science* titled “Quantitative Analysis of Culture using Millions of Digitized Books” a new freely accessible tool was introduced to facilitate the study of culture which quantified and compared the occurrences of terms appearing between 1800 and 2000 in a collection of over five million digitized books (Baptiste et al 2011). By entering terms into the Google Books Ngram Viewer a graph displayed the frequency of the terms drawn from a body of texts at a scale not previously possible. The y-axis showed of all Ngrams (one-word terms) or bigrams (two-word terms) contained in the selected Google corpora, what percentage matched the search terms. The x axis displayed the time frames in which those terms appeared. Google Books Ngrams offered the potential to quickly and easily bring before the eye a comparative visual display of the occurrences of terms over time drawn from millions of digitized texts spread over the course of two hundred years. One of the potential applications of Ngrams highlighted in the article was for assessing and interrogating the nature of fame and the comparative historical trajectories of the famous.

When the original Google Books Ngram Viewer was revealed in 2009, caveats to its use were identified (Pechenick 2015; Zhang 2015). Criticism was made concerning the overabundance of science texts in the corpora and the quality of the Optical Character Recognition (OCR). These issues were addressed in an update in 2012. Compared to the 2009 versions, the 2012 versions had more books, improved OCR and improved library and publisher metadata. The 2012 versions also ceased to form Ngrams that crossed sentence boundaries while maintaining Ngrams that occurred across page boundaries. Recent scholarship has sought to offer methodological guidelines to address identified weaknesses in the use of Ngrams and improve the robustness of results (Reips and Younes 2019).

Following the recommendation by Reips and Younes to run searches across several corpora and compare results when using Ngrams, the following Google Books corpora have been used to compare Eliot and Dickens: British English 2012 (Books predominantly in the English language that were published in Great Britain); American English 2012 (Books predominately in the English language that were published in the United States); English 2012 (Books predominantly in the English language published in any country); English Fiction 2012 (Books predominantly in the English language that a library or publisher identified as fiction); English One Million: “The Google Million” (Books in English with dates ranging from 1500 to 2008). No more than about 6000 books were chosen from any one year, which means that all of the scanned books from early years are present, and books from later years are randomly sampled. The random samplings reflect the subject distributions for the year (so there are more computer books in 2000 than 1980); French 2012 (Books predominantly in the French language); German 2012 (Books predominately in the German language); and Italian 2012 (Books predominantly in the Italian language).

Figures 1 to 6 below reveal that between 1800 and 2000 in a corpus of over five million digitized texts the occurrences of the bi-gram “George Eliot” supersedes, keeps pace with or only marginally dips below that of the bi-gram “Charles Dickens”.

[INSERT FIGS 1-7 HERE]

As a comparator of their relative statuses this depiction of Eliot sits at odds with her secondary position in popular culture where she is eclipsed by the dominance of Dickens in the cultural media of film and TV. Furthermore when comparing specific titles by Eliot and Dickens, shown in Figures 8 to 10 below, Eliot’s work again keeps pace with, supersedes or slightly dips below that of Dickens – a surprising textual buoyancy when contrasted with Eliot’s diminutive adaptation record compared with that of Dickens.

[INSERT FIGS 8-10 HERE]

The general parity of references to Eliot and her works with those of Dickens suggests a story of enduring literary renown, but a stickiness surrounding that renown that stops her fame travelling beyond books. To return to our question of *where* each author is famous, as opposed to when, Dickens travels beyond the literary and into other media and hence towards mass public recognition. Eliot’s lower public profile in the new visual media forms of the twentieth century and beyond stem from two aspects of her management of the innovations in celebrity and media in her own age: first the formation of Eliot’s image or brand and second the amenability of her works to translation into different forms of visual (and social) media. Managing the transition to different media and performing celebrity hence emerge as two key distinctions between Eliot and Dickens in relation to public commemoration.

1. **Intimacy and Mass Affect: Eliot and Literary Celebrity**

Celebrity, as Tom Mole suggests, is a relatively recent development, but one that predates the age of photography and film. It is “a cultural apparatus, consisting of the relations between an individual, an industry and an audience, that took shape in response to the industrializing print culture of the late eighteenth century” (Mole 2007, ix; Hawkins and Ives 2012). Always less desirable than fame, nineteenth-century celebrity nevertheless thrived in the sphere of print and the proliferation of its forms in the period. As Mole argues in relation to Byron, and Richard Salmon and Alexis Easley pursue in relation to writers later in the century, the emergence of literary celebrity went hand in hand with the affect of intimacy (Salmon 1997, 159-77; Easley 2011, 137-156). A sense of intimate relation with the author in *propria personae* reached out beyond the readerly relation with poem or novel. The circulation of authorial portraits, locks of hair, photographs, personal interviews at home, anthologies and birthday books all worked to construct a zone of affect around the name of the author (Wah 2010, 385). The author emerged as a commodity and a repository of mass public affect central to the development of ever more imaginative developments in the commerce of print cultures.

Eliot’s biographers and critics have given us a wealth of material to reflect on Eliot’s own careful negotiation of the new opportunities – and threats – presented by a print market and readership hungry for authorial celebrity as well as literary renown (Bodenheimer 1994; Dillane 2013), and the changing reputation of her work (Harris 2019). Whilst the guarded process of becoming George Eliot might suggest Marian Evans withdrew from celebrity and the public eye courted by Dickens, and was, to borrow a phrase used by Sarah Wah, “the most churlish of celebrities”, her canny pursuit of literary opportunities and, as McCormack has argued, her extensive programme of literary salons at the Priory and European literary contacts and travel, demonstrate a real interest in fame and fortune. Eliot, for example, was the first woman writer to feature in the innovative money-spinning genre of the “Birthday Book”, filled with selective quotations from her work (Price 2003; Ives 2012, 102). Leah Price has demonstrated how Eliot was alert to and engaged with the management of her superfan, Alexander Main, and his multiple editions of the *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse of George Eliot* (Price 2003; Main 1872-1896). Eliot did not wash her hands of this deliberate marketing of her narrator’s sayings packaged as spoken “in *propria persona*” and the intimate cohabitation of page, quotation and personal life represented by the genre of the birthday book. Rather, she acquiesced to Blackwood’s suggestion that this kind of output was necessary to attract the “colonial market”: a sort of intimate gateway to deeper engagement with her fiction through what Price terms “the production of consumers” perhaps; certainly a means to profit, as Dermot Coleman’s work indicates (Price 2003, 120; Coleman 2014, 52-68).

The process of becoming “George Eliot” might suggest that here was an author ready for the commodification and performance of the self that were hallmarks of literary celebrity by the 1860s and 1870s. Even before the creation of her literary pseudonym, Marian Evans had been involved in a complex series of self-authoring gestures. From plain Mary Anne of provincial Warwickshire to the relaunched Marian Evans of London and the world by the early 1850s, by 1857 a document in Nuneaton Museum records Eliot’s extraordinary success in making another name for herself altogether: Mrs Marian Lewes. The document in question is a receipt for Eliot’s annual payment by the trustees of the interest on various investments left to her by her father, Robert Evans. To insist – with success – that her friends address her as Mrs Lewes is one thing; to project that identity with sufficient authority to have it realized in the legal context of payments in trust, seems quite extraordinary.[[12]](#endnote-12) And yet, as many biographers have pointed out over the years, being Mrs Lewes (or not) was a major inhibitor to Eliot’s position in the public eye. As we shall see in the next section, it certainly informed the posthumous process of reputation management led by her husband John Cross, and his ally, Lord Acton. But first, other aspects of celebrity and fame require our attention

[INSERT FIG 11 HERE]

In mapping the emergence of celebrity at the dawn of the nineteenth century, Mole identifies three forces: a confessional author, curious readers, and the developing print industry and book trade (Mole 2007, 2). Celebrity is produced by all three players, cultivating a particular mode of reading for intimacy; a mode that traverses public and private, text and authorial life. It is this desire for intimacy and its fulfilment through various modes of consumption that characterizes the difference between celebrity and public fame. Mole’s own examples are drawn from the realm of Romantic verse in which celebrity is a new lens through which to view the claim that Romanticism is a “poetics of self-expression, which gains its potency from personality” (Mole 2007, xiv). Mole’s theory thus works very well in relation to lyric poetry – in which the tease and partial reveal of “personality” was central to the genre and its affect. But the emergence of the celebrity novelist – perhaps best located in the career of Sir Walter Scott during the same period – requires some further analysis of the intrinsic literary components of celebrity authorship. In the case of Scott, Dickens, and – to some lesser extent – Eliot, authorial celebrity in their own lifetimes stemmed from the construction of a shared immersive world, populated by a wealth of characters whose names and turns of phrase were immediately internalized and reused as touchstones in everyday discourse (Rigney 2012, 1-8). Intimacy, although an essential affect of the celebrity of novelists as well as Romantic poets, did not, therefore, stem from the confessional mode, but arose through the construction and transmission of a sphere of shared ownership of characters, between author and reader. The electrifying effects of Dickens’s reading tours on mass audiences in the 1860s were, in this sense, a shared realization between author and readers of their mutual constitution of the power of character; and in turn the role of that power creating the novelist as celebrity.

The early reception of Eliot’s fiction fitted perfectly into this construct of intimate shared space. Reviews and letters to Eliot make clear that the words of Mrs Poyser and Mrs Tulliver became catchphrases almost directly upon publication of *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. Intimacy with Eliot arose from the recognition of the familiarity of a Mrs Poyser or Lisbeth Bede, a sense that the author knew and was from a world known to the reader and a shared public acknowledgement of truth in the text as it travelled out into the world. But developments in the print market and media technology from the mid-1860s onwards – in addition to Eliot’s own increasingly ambivalent reflections on the idea of mass culture and its affect – led to a growing divergence between Eliot’s celebrity status and that of her near contemporary Dickens. Dillane suggests that biographical information about Eliot in the periodical press, for example, was scanty even at the peak of her fame. (Dillane 2013, 144-5). And although the celebrity author interview did not gain pace in Britain until the later 1880s and 1890s, Eliot’s total visual absence in the years of the raging popularity of the collectible *carte de visite* photograph (c. 1860-1875), meant that the affect of intimacy could travel only between author, reader, and text rather than spiraling out into a world of images and objects (Salmon 1997, 159-177; Elliott 2016, 526-544; Livesey 2020). More recently Dillane has argued that a shared memorialization, a “collective imaginary framed by knowledge gaps, gendered prejudices and nostalgia …[for] rural life”, (Dillane 2020, 22) was so widespread after Eliot’s death that the accounts established a “hotchpotch of both fact and fiction, the circulation” of which “enshrined the memory of the writer …so effectively that the trope of the horse-faced woman with the big jaw and immense ugliness has persisted as a negative dimension that somehow needs explaining” (Dillane 2020, 22). The persistence of this body of comments, purportedly acknowledging Eliot’s talent while undershot with slurs about her appearance, forms a “template” that occupies the vacuum left by Eliot’s rebuttal of visual self-commodification during her lifetime, resurfacing, as Dillane notes, in contemporary fictional depictions of the writer (Dillane 2020, 26).

 In the final three decades of the nineteenth century the extra-textual trans-medial forms needed to foster authorial celebrity reached full development. The celebrity “At Home” interview promised a flash of domesticity revealing the woman behind the books, alongside the literary gossip column; collectible *cartes des viste* photographs made it possible to gaze upon the face that imagined your beloved books; a flourishing new industry of travel guides promised to show you the way to the “real” places and characters that inspired the works (Booth 2016; Watson 2006). The mass-fabrication of celebrity became more extra- than intra-textual and was sustained by the serial iterations of newspapers and periodicals. As Eliot herself wrote with some prescience in regard to new social media and the decline of small scale intimacy in the salon, “no one is satisfied with a more circumscribed audience than that very indeterminate abstraction ‘the public’, leading her to worry lest “some further development of the electric telegraph should reduce us to a society of mutes, or to a sort of insects, communicating by ingenious antennae of our own invention” (Eliot 1990, 16). The results of Eliot’s increasing divergence from the changing infrastructure of authorial celebrity were long-lasting. Dillane notes the increasing conflation of Eliot “in propria personae” with the words of her narrators in the absence of other means to know the author. Meanwhile the extra-textual reach of Eliot’s works and their affect beyond a singular reader-text relation were stymied. “Eliot” became increasingly associated with her narrator and hence a vision of distanced sententiousness, rather than immersive world-building and the touchstone of shared investment in characters. The sense that an object, a character, or a story could be “Eliotian” in a like manner to “Dickensian” or “Hardyesque” seems to have evaporated as her works expanded away from the realist pastoral of the “just past” evoked in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* (Livesey 2016, 2)*.* An adjectival Eliot, “the Eliotian world” ready for adaption and application beyond the page thus failed to travel beyond the singular location of “The George Eliot Country” in the English Midlands.

A lack of engagement with the new extra-textual forms of literary celebrity in her own lifetime certainly inhibited the growth of an affect of intimacy around Eliot and what she signified beyond a readerly experience on the page. But the emergence of Eliot as an esteemed author who represented everything at odds with the intimacy that underpinned mass celebrity was part and parcel of the posthumous management of Eliot’s reputation by her husband and biographer, John Cross, and her canonization by his correspondent Lord Acton.

1. **Cross, Acton and the price of posthumous canonization**

The negative impact of Cross’s biography on Eliot’s public persona was noted when it was published in 1885. Dubbed by a contemporaneous reader, Alice James, “a monument of ponderous dreariness” (James 1982, 41), it has remained a touchstone in Eliot discourse. The role of Lord Acton in Cross’s biography was recognized seventy years ago by Haight, who noted Acton’s engagement in the biography from beginning to end. In addition to agreeing to write a review of the biography before Cross had even written it, in order “to strike the right note at the moment of publication” (Haight 1950, 5), Acton’s letters demonstrate his hands-on approach to shaping the biography itself. This encompassed reading proofs, nudging Cross towards an emphasis upon Eliot’s intellectual and spiritual development and Haight suggests “his sound advice on the phrasing of certain delicate passages such as the comment on George Eliot’s liaison with Lewes, which, at his suggestion, Cross suppressed” (Haight 1950, 5).

If Cross’s inhibited biography removed the “salt and spice” (White 1902, 159) from Eliot’s life, Acton’s extensive review, published in *Nineteenth Century* and reprinted in 1907, went much further in removing Eliot from the intimate zone of celebrity affect (Acton 1885, 273). Less a review of the biography than a full-scale evaluation of Eliot’s intellect and ultimate (moral) purpose, Acton’s article came from a very particular perspective. As Harris notes, its driving force was a recognition of Eliot's “moral authority, qualified by censure of her breaches of both moral and civil law” (Harris 2009, 29). Acton elevated Eliot’s secular piousness and top-and-tailed her life with examples of her intense religious engagement. He depicted her union with Lewes as a “temporary” fall from grace, blaming Lewes openly for failing to recognize her “sovereign ability” and for devaluing “his prize” and thus consigning her to a marginal position in intellectual (and religious) society. (Acton 1907, 293). Whether Acton’s review succeeded in striking the “right note” was questionable given, as Harris points out, Cross’s shock and defense of G.H. Lewes, whom Acton scapegoated in his review, in a move to sanctify Eliot as the best moral instructor the atheist tradition had produced (Acton 1907, 290-291).

In sanctifying Eliot, Acton not only distanced her from Lewes and from writers she admired (but whom he found morally questionable) but from what, he deemed, the greater elevated morality she displayed in her novels:

Her admiration for Rousseau, for Shelley, for Jacques, the most ignominious of George Sand’s stories, her description of the indissolubility of marriage as a diabolical law, indicate that her opinions did not always keep the elevated level of her early religion and her later philosophy. But in her novels the tone is extremely high. (Acton 1907, 291).

In shifting Eliot to the moral high ground Acton neutralized her radicalism and negated her self-determination. He depicted Eliot as a woman wrongfooted by her own lack of self-esteem into a lowering relationship. While acknowledging that in partnering Lewes “she acted in conformity with that which in 1854 she esteemed right” her action, he argued, was “in contradiction to that which was the dominant and enduring spirit of her own work” (Acton 1907, 290). In terms of the dichotomy between sententious interventions or “beauties” ready made for quotation and the action or flow of narrative plot, identified by Price in her 2003 work on the role of quotation and anthology on Eliot’s work and public reception, Cross and Acton came down squarely on the side of moral purpose. Cross’s biography was influential, as Chapman notes, in shaping Eliot’s posthumous persona because of his unfettered access to the author and her personal archive (Chapman 2015, 79). Cross’s biography safeguarded Eliot’s claim to canonization, but as Chapman notes, made her deeply unappealing for the new age of trans-medial celebrity in which the affect of intimacy, as opposed to intellectual or moral esteem, laid the foundation for authorial appeal. Eliot’s posthumous reputation was one of esteem and intellectual distinction, not the lively affect of intimacy moving between text and world, anchored in material culture, that underpinned mass celebrity.

Acton’s notebooks at Cambridge University Library reveal his own perception of a tension between presenting Eliot as an intellectual systemizer as opposed to an artist shaping shared aesthetic affect within her works themselves. In the course of preparing his review, his notes admonish himself, “I must not detach her system. She never gives it as a system. She is only an encourager of virtue.” Acton knew that if he canonized Eliot as a moral lawgiver it “would soon be seen that I go too far” (Acton (n.d.) MS Notebooks. Cambridge University Library Add. 5019-5021.) And yet despite this Acton’s review represented Eliot as a sort of Old Testament sage, claiming “retribution is the constant theme and motive for her art” (Acton 1907, 285). Eliot’s own emotions and affect constitute for Acton a problem to be set aside, a troubling distraction from establishing her rightful claim to high-status fame in the “foremost rank among the women of her time, and a tomb in Westminster Abbey” (Acton 1907, 291). His Notebook records “She could not measure all she had renounced” and he whitewashes her desire, explaining it away as

One ~~great~~ manifest error pervades this turbid period of her life. Her judgement of men and things around her is vitiated by her extraordinary ~~failure in estimation of he~~r underestimate of herself. (Acton (n,d,) [MS] Notebooks. Cambridge University Library ADD 5019-5021)

In his Notebooks, Acton highlights Eliot’s radicalism, her defiance of society, her criticism of the clergy, her rejection of religion and her bumptiousness. But these elements of her character he omits from his *Review*.

So we have first some asperity-

animosity of religion

severity agt [against] the clergy

Bumptiousness

Defiance of society

Then preaching reverence and obedience

(Acton (n.d.) MS Notebooks. Cambridge University Library Add. 5019-5021)

Just as Maine in his anthologies had shifted Eliot into a male poetic tradition, Acton moved her into an anti-affective sphere of philosophical thought to counter this problem. “The supreme purpose of all her work is ethical”, Acton opined, and “to reconcile the practical ethics of unbelief and of belief, to save virtue and happiness when dogmas and authorities decay” (Acton 1907, 283).

In an era in which authorial celebrity – in particular female authorial celebrity – was increasingly indexed by flashes of the domestic or personal, and extra-textual afterlives guaranteed by narrative adaptations, Eliot’s reputation was shattered into discrete fragments. As a figure of profound influence and a touchstone within the sphere of the literary she endured – and triumphed perhaps, in the years essential to the formation of a canon of English Literature. But her life and works failed to travel beyond that into the trans-medial realm of celebrity and popular culture. Reputation management by Cross and Acton played a large part in Eliot’s exile from the realms of affect and celebrity in the late nineteenth century. As well as these extra-textual factors, however, one final contrast with Dickens can help clarify the role of the intrinsic aesthetic of Eliot’s novels in determining the increasing absence of her works in the sphere of popular culture. Despite the intense engagement of Eliot’s works with the discourse of visual art – something drawn on to good effect in Wearing’s “Everything is Connected” (2019) – adaptations of her work on stage and screen are infrequent. Eliot’s fiction itself problematizes the idea of trans-medial portability. Unlike her contemporary Dickens, whom she noted was “gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits” of his characters, Eliot’s innovations in realism deliberately turned away from the visual realm of “showing” stories (Eliot 1990, 111).

1. **Screened Out: Eliot, Adaptation, and Popular Culture**

In the bicentenary of Eliot’s birth, there was no new (and no repeated) film or TV adaptation of her work broadcast in the UK. No part of the BBC’s back catalogue was repeated or made available on BBC iPlayer. In the week of Eliot’s anniversary, the new adaptation that filled BBC One’s prime time classic Sunday evening slot was H. G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*. In the bicentenary of her birth Eliot’s work failed to make it onto the large or small screen. As early as 1991, Derek Paget suggested that Eliot’s works had been “screened off or screened out” from TV and film adaptations, arguing that “George Eliot has never been quite so marketable as, for example, Dickens” (Paget 1991, 275). Although Paget’s words about Eliot being “screened off” relate to a specific adaptation of *Mill on the Floss* in 1991, (before Andrew Davies’s adaptations of *Middlemarch* in 1994 and *Daniel Deronda* in 2002), they still have resonance today given Davies’s adaptations are now twenty-four and sixteen years old respectively, and there have been no new adaptations of Eliot’s work and no biopics of her life in the intervening years. In 2007 there was a flutter of excitement in press reports that Oscar winning director, Sam Mendes was “taking Eliot to the cinema” and would direct the first big screen version of *Middlemarch* (Hoyle 2007; Mendes to Direct Mini-Middlemarch 2007; Mendes Beats Scorsese to Middlemarch Movie 2009). The project however has not come to fruition to date and Eliot currently remains conspicuous in mainstream film and TV, by her absence.

The BFI Reuben Library catalogue lists just twenty fiction films and TV series adapted from George Eliot’s work released between 1911 and 2002 in the UK, US and Italy, the BBC accounting for twelve productions overall. Eliot’s film and TV adaptations are statistically swamped by those of Dickens, who remains the novelist whose works have been most frequently adapted for screen (John 2012, 2; Glavin 2012, viii-ix). The BFI catalogue lists 196 Dickens fiction film and TV adaptations released in the UK, USA, Canada, France, Germany, Portugal, Australia, Italy, Denmark and South Africa from the advent of film in 1901 to today. In the first decade of the twentieth century the BFI catalogue lists one film adaptation of Eliot’s work (Romola) directed by Mario Ceserini and released in Italy by Cines. In the same period nine of Dickens works were released on film in the UK and America including A *Christmas Caro*l, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *A Tale* *of Two Cities*. While Eliot was wholly absent from large or small screen during her bicentenary year, Dickens’s dominance of the medium was again on show. A new adaptation of *David Copperfield* by Armando Iannucci opened the 2019 London Film festival and received eleven nominations for the British Independent Film Awards (Pulver 2009), subsequently winning five including best screen play. Furthermore, a new BBC mini-series of *A Christmas Carol,* adapted by Steven Knight, the screenwriter behind *Peaky Blinders,* occupied the prime-time slot in the BBC Christmas schedule being broadcast on three consecutive nights on the run up to Christmas Eve. The wealth of Dickens’ novels on film and TV represents the extreme end of the scale of literary adaptations. Comparing the adaptation records of Eliot to Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and Thomas Hardy, all of whom trail below her in the Google Books NGram shown in Figure 12, shows Eliot holding her own. According to the BFI online catalogue there are twelve film and television adaptations of Charlotte Bronte’s work between 1915 and 2015: thirteen adaptations of Emily Bronte’s work between 1939 and 2010 and twenty-five adaptations of Thomas Hardy’s novels and short stories between 1915 and 2015. Eliot with nineteen adaptations between 1911 and 2002 compares favorably in relation to all three, but they are all pale in comparison to Dickens’ film and TV adaptation record of 195. However, the seemingly mass cultural penetration of Charlotte and Emily Bronte relies on one work each. Eleven of Charlotte’s twelve adaptations are of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* accounts for Emily’s entire adaptation record. In contrast far more of Eliot’s oeuvre has been adapted and, in this variety, she is similar to the varied adaptation record of Charles Dickens (though not its scale) and the diffused adaptation record of Thomas Hardy. The Bronte sisters are however strong in brand terms, the reiteration in film and TV adaptations of *one* specific title from their oeuvres, strengthening their cultural profile with a strong, single narrative. This strength is similarly reflected in the record of biopics of the Brontes, a genre in which Eliot’s complicated image has left her vastly under-represented. In March 2019 *Variety* reported Jessica Chastain’s Freckle Films had optioned the movie rights to Dinitra Smith’s historical drama *The Honeymoon: A Novel of George Eliot*, but this has not yet been realized. (Mcnary 2019). The difficulty of leveraging a culturally dominant afterlife for the manufactured memorial image of Eliot was exacerbated by its collision with a new image-based culture which dominated in the centuries following her death.

[INSERT FIG 12 HERE]

Furthermore, as Philip Bolton has shown, Eliot was resistant to her work being adapted for the stage and few dramatizations of her work appeared during her lifetime (Bolton 2000, 200). This resistance to the translation of her work to different media marks an early divergence from Dickens. Whilst Juliet John has changed our understanding of Dickens’s debts to popular stage melodrama, John Glavin notes the number of stage adaptations of Dickens’s works staged within his own lifetime (John 2003, 70-84; Glavin 2012, vi). Dickens characters and Dickens plots are, from the outset, portable. Licensed to escape the page for the stage, Dickens’s works declared their relative autonomy from the form of the novel from the very beginning. With the onset of film, critics and directors from Sergei Eisenstein onwards identified Dickens’s narrative techniques with a kind of cinema before cinema. Proleptic textual analogies of montage, flashback, panning shots and dissolves indicate Dickens’s own fascination with the popular visual entertainments of his own era. This dialogue between literary and cinematic form in the case of Dickens seems the diametric opposite of perceptions of Eliot’s narrative mode, despite her own serious interest in the narrative possibilities of phantasmagoria and split-screen vision.

For the influential film critic James Agee writing in the 1940s, the more a writer provoked expectations of the serious, the literary, or the high-minded for cinema goers, the less innovative the film could be in relation to its own art form. It was as if, he fumed, “serious-minded” cinema goers would only be satisfied with a reverence to the literary that delivered something like “a good faithful adaptation of *Adam Bede* in sepia, with the entire text read offscreen by Herbert Marshall” (qtd in McFarlane 1996, 8). This off-hand association of Eliot’s novel with everything that resisted a successful, lively afterlife in another medium is in part a reflection on Eliot’s narrative mode. The association of Eliot’s fiction with the intrusive, omniscient narrator who tells us things (read offscreen), rather than showing them to us; who presents a scene and then pulls it apart remains one of the aspects of her fiction most resistant to adaptation. Although recent critics have stressed the over-playing of the narrator in Eliot’s works by past readers and drawn fresh attention to the subtle movement into different centers of consciousness through free indirect discourse within her narrative technique, that careful narratological work has yet to travel outwards into the hands of an inventive writer or director.

Agee’s comments also return us to the problem of the stickiness of Eliot’s fame that we identified in our distant reading of the textual corpora. Her fame is anchored in the literary alone and of a form of the literary that resists mass experience and mass communication. Eliot, it is true, benefited from a mass readership, but she was uncomfortable about the idea of her work being “popular”, enclosing the term in scare quotes as she reflected on the lesser fortunes of her historical novel, *Romola* (Haight IV, 49). If Dickens’s works, as John and others suggest, contain within them the projection of a network of affections and a shared mass reading community, Eliot’s novels construct a much more individual notion of readership in their modes of narratorial address. In her own era, Eliot noted, “the circle represented by the word *public*, is ever widening”; but the novel, in Eliot’s hands was reconstituted as a place for the fictional development of reading as “personal communication” and reflection, albeit experienced by vast numbers of readers across the globe (Eliot 1990, 15). Eliot’s fame remains confined to the literary sphere. As the proportion of readers familiar with her works and characters declines, so too does the affect of mass intimacy needed for celebrity even within that sphere. When saying “He’s a bit of a Mr Casaubon” in a moment of asperity about a professional rival meets only blank looks, then celebrity sustained by mutual recognition of Eliot’s characters as a touchstone for life will have gone altogether, though Eliot’s fame and canonicity may endure.

**Conclusion**

In her ground-breaking work on the fame and forgetting of Walter Scott, Ann Rigney concludes that, above all, Scott’s “role has changed because literature itself is no longer the source of collective identity and the focus of cultural values that it was three generations ago” (Rigney 2012, 227). A capacity for – and history of - moving beyond the literary sphere is key to establishing celebrity and ensuring widespread public commemoration in the 21st century. Eliot, unlike Dickens did not lay the groundwork for her transition to film and international fame with extensive international tours and supercharged theatrical readings of her work and she did not write with Dickens’ performer’s eye on the route from page to stage. Eliot’s novels so often insist on the importance of change and action that is inward, invisible, and not even present to the consciousness of her characters. And the challenges she lays down to readerly expectations around plot purposefully refuse an easy narrative arc. Eliot’s endings are wonderfully unsatisfying; the wrong people marry each other; the whole narrative takes place in a world lacking clear-cut, good and evil characters in which outcomes are indefinite. Selling the idea of an adaptation of Eliot in mainstream media therefore may present, particularly when shackled with her image problem, certain challenges.

Why should that matter when, as we have demonstrated, Eliot’s fame in the literary corpus, far from being precarious, endures and keeps pace with Dickens? A useful perspective comes from Sarah Phelps, author of acclaimed adaptations of Dickens and Agatha Christie.[[13]](#endnote-13) Answering criticisms in an interview that she had altered the ending of a Christie novel, she argued:

Writers want to be read. They don’t want to be venerated, they don’t want to be a brand, they don’t want to be a heritage trail, they don’t want to be fudge, they don’t want to be a tea towel (Phelps 2019).

Phelps’s robust answer foregrounds two easily overlooked effects of strong adaptations. First, adaptation, as a new writerly engagement, can insist on the modernity and urgency of works too often framed as fusty “heritage” artefacts of a bygone age. Second, TV adaptations in particular serve as a gateway to bring new readers to the books themselves. Without this refreshing and widening of Eliot’s readerships, her status even in the literary corpus may continue to decline across time.

The advantage of being a major authorial “brand” with a heritage trail -overlooked perhaps by Phelps - is of course that a commercial decision to support a dramatization appears lower risk. As we have shown, Eliot was an astute manager of her celebrity in the literary sphere in her own lifetime, as is evident in her consent to Alexander Main’s anthologies. But the management of her afterlife and image, dominated by Cross and Acton, made for a reputation locked into nineteenth-century paradigms of intellectualism and moral earnestness. So much could be done to resurrect Eliot herself as an image of and for modernity: her self-doubt; her struggle to forge and then preserve a public and a private identity; her distrust of fame; her public shaming and checkered afterlife make her a relevant touchstone in 21st century social and cultural discourse about women, creativity, identity and power. Furthermore, her concern to narrativize a multiplicity of viewpoints in her work make her acutely relevant, as one commentator noted during Eliot’s bicentenary week, to “today’s divided Britain.” (Hughes 2019). A rediscovery of Eliot’s modernity through a biopic might draw fresh attention and readers to her novels.

But academic research has a more direct role to play in refreshing the study of Eliot’s works through the critical methods we bring to bear on them. The 21st century has new digital tools at its disposal to assess Eliot and her work, though their use, as Terras et al have argued, are still, without assistance, hampered by “too many technical hurdles for most individuals in the humanities to consider analyzing at scale … increasingly available open datasets” (Terras et al 2018, 463). Our use of Google Ngrams has served as one small example of the surprising insights that arise from diversifying our approach. Text mining offer further scope for understanding of the cultural penetration and endurance of particular authors. Searching laterally across quotations used to illustrate definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, for example, Dickens’ work is cited over 8784 times in 6256 entries while Eliot is quoted 3073 times in 2809 entries.[[14]](#endnote-14) Dickens language, statistically speaking, may be a more highly performing conduit than Eliot’s for cultural penetration. Another area ripe for exploration is the texts within Eliot’s texts and her texts within those of other nineteenth century writers. Text mining Eliot’s work against the body of texts she cites across her oeuvre, might offer a unique perspective on how one of the nineteenth century’s most highly functioning intellectuals synthesized some of the most potent ideas from centuries of thought within her own work. It would meet her, too, in the place in which she, in her own lifetime, invested her creative energies, in her text.

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1. George Eliot 2019: An International Bicentenary Conference. Victorian Studies Centre, University of Leicester 7-9 July 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “What’s So Great About George Eliot?’ a panel discussion chaired by Kathryn Hughes with Deborah Moggach, Sathnam Sanghera and Juliet Stephenson. British Library Knowledge Centre on 21 November 2019. “George Eliot at 200”, Institute of English Studies, Senate House, 21 November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “Portraying George Eliot”, National Portrait Gallery, January and December 2019. Rosemary Ashton’s lunchtime lecture “George Eliot: From ‘Strong-minded Woman’ to Great Novelist”, 9 November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “*Middlemarch* In Our Time”, originally broadcast in 2018, featured two Eliot biographers, Rosemary Ashton, Emeritus Quail Professor at University College London and Kathryn Hughes, Professor of Life Writing at the University of East Anglia, with John Bowen, Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature at the University of York. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “George Eliot in Five Characters” featured Kathryn Hughes, Philip Davis, Tessa Hadley, Sarah Moss, Sathnam Sanghera, David Constantine and Kathy O’Shaughnessy. BBC Radio 4 19-23 November 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. “Words and Music: George Eliot’s World”, 19 November 2019. Extracts from Eliot’s work and comments about her from Henry James and Virginia Woolf. Readings by Fiona Shaw, Ellie Kendrick and Philip Bretherton and music by Clara Schumann, Bach, Liszt, Haydn, Handel and Purcell. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *The Mill on the Floss* reassessed on BBC Radio 3 20 November 2019 with writer Rebecca Mead, actor Fiona Shaw and academics Philip Davis, Dafydd Daniel and Peggy Reynolds. “New Thinking: George Eliot” also on BBC Radio 3, Shahidha Bari discussed Eliot’s “provincial” life and her innovative realism with academics Ruth Livesey, Helen O’Neill, and Gail Marshall. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The British Council sponsored exhibitions in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Australia and supported projects using Dickens as a platform to discuss contemporary art and literature across sixty-six countries. In Berlin it sponsored the Conference “What Would Dickens Write Today?” while London Film and the BFI staged film presentations in twenty-five countries, and Immersive Theatre took a company of actors around the world (Film London 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Created by artist Mike Dutton on sheets of vellum the Dickens bicentenary Google doodle was larger and more detailed than usual https://www.google.com/doodles/charles-dickens-200th-birthday http://booksearch.blogspot.com/2012/02/doodling-for-dickens-birthday-behind.html [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “A Hankering after Ghosts: Charles Dickens and the Supernatural” British Library November 2011 - March 2012; “Dickens and London” Museum of London and an exhibition of Dickens portraits took place at the National Portrait Gallery during the Dickens’ bicentenary. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Developed by the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) and the National Schools Partnership the programme aimed to inspire creative writing in schools and an understanding of the importance of copyright. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Harriet F. Adams (2000, 52) has shown that “Marian Lewes” legally adopted G.H. Lewes’s surname through a legal deed of declaration (now in the George Eliot collection at the Beinecke) on 31 January 1879, two months after G.H. Lewes’ death. The Nuneaton receipt predates that legal name change by twenty-two years. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Phelps’s adaptations for the BBC include screenplays for *Oliver Twist* (2007); *Great Expectations* (2011); five episodes of Dickensian (2015) and five Agatha Christie titles: And Then there Were None (2015); The Witness for the Prosecution (2016); Ordeal by Innocence (2018); The ABC Murders (2018) and The Pale Horse (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. *OED* results as at 20 January 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)