Scenes of Defiant Female Lives: Review of Robert Muscutt, *Heathen and Outcast* and *The Defiance of Mary Ball*

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Robert Muscutt, *Heathen and Outcast: Scenes in the Life of George Eliot*
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In both *Heathen and Outcast* and *The Defiance of Mary Ball*, Robert Muscutt enlivens the (neo)-Victorian scene of two defiant female lives namely those of Mary Ann Evans alias George Eliot, the canonical female novelist, and of the working-class Mary Ball, convicted and executed for murder. The novels deftly handle the oft-used form of neo-Victorian feminist biofiction. In the recent past, several such narratives, including *Lady's Maid* (1990) by Margaret Forster and *Alias Grace* (1996) by Margaret Atwood, have either tried to unearth the hidden aspects of famous Victorian women or throw into wider relief the real and imaginary resistance to Victorian patriarchy of faceless, ordinary nineteenth-century women. These texts try to indicate how women who asserted their individuality were broadly treated as "heathen and outcast" in a repressive social atmosphere.

What does an obscure woman like Mary Ball have in common with Mary Ann Evans, the most celebrated female thinker and writer of her times? Perhaps only her first name, or the geographical setting to which they both belong? There is a brief scene in *The Defiance of Mary Ball* where the

two women visit the same shop (p.90), apart from which their lives never intersect. Yet if we look deeper into their troubled lives, we may discover many more commonalities than at first apparent.

Eliot's life and character is mainly presented by her close friend Edith Jemima Simcox, juxtaposed with the versions offered by her first teacher and later friend Maria Lewis and that of her closest male friend Charles Bray, as well as her own re-telling of some of the significant episodes of her youth. Ball's life is remembered by her admirer John Astley who preserves for her only surviving daughter Elizabeth all her mother's memories. All these observers and recorders of the two Marys' lives agree that what renders both these women as repeated targets of male ire is their indomitable spirit to protest against patriarchal tyranny and survive against the odds in a heavily prejudiced society. Muscutt's neo-Victorian re-telling of their lives brings together a collage of scenes that can be described as defining moments for the creation of their strongly recalcitrant selfhoods, their self-confidence and aplomb colliding with patriarchal dictums. But the mode of re-telling is not very experimental in that it lacks any expression of metabiographical self-reflexivity on the part of the author. Instead it relies on a more or less linear narrativisation and re-interpretation of these mercurial female selves worth recalling for their ability to oppose and resist the double standards of Victorian sexism. In *Heathen and Outcast* there is some interplay of multiple perspectives by the presentation of four different versions of the nearly similar experiences in Eliot's life, but in the case of *The Defiance of Mary Ball* the narrative voice is mainly either that of her secret admirer Astley or that of the author himself interested in re-telling the unfortunate life of his great-great-grandmother. These novels make intelligent use of the interface between Victorian patriarchy and transgressive women rather than dazzling readers with any experimental biofictional narratology that deliberately plays on incoherence and enigma.

To underscore these women's unique marginality one recurrent motif Muscutt uses throughout *Heathen and Outcast* is that of the central female protagonist's self-perception, both by herself and others, as an outcast. Isaac, Eliot's brother, hits her hard with the following words, which keep reminding the readers of an 'un-belongingness' typical of the future writer: "[S]ociety doesn't ask what a woman thinks. It asks to whom she belongs" (p. 14). This gives her a heightened sense that she is both "a financial burden to the family" and "a social embarrassment" on account of

her atheism. (p. 15). Her atheist views also reduce her to a female "heathen" vis-à-vis Christianity and an "outcast" for not belonging to any man – neither father, brother nor husband capable of providing her with bourgeois respectability. Isaac vehemently objects to her move to obtain a teaching job in Leamington as he thinks that it will make her an "outcast" beyond the family's help and control (p. 32). Ironically, Eliot feels that at Griff House, her home since her childhood, she is more of an outcast than in Geneva where she stays for a short while (p. 102), or perhaps, a "visitor" or even a "trespasser" (p. 109). Much later she again confesses to George Lewes that "[w]ith you I'd be an outcast" and regrets that "I've been an outcast and a heathen for many years" (p. 163). The dream-motif used, recalling Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), explains the tangled emotions of the female-protagonist longing in her unconscious mind for recognition, respect and emotional security. If we analyse the two irrational and chaotic dreams she narrates (pp. 130-131, 141) we gain an insight into her troubled encounter with her defiant self that cannot reconcile itself with people around her, intensifying her sense of desperate isolation.

If Eliot is a social outcast, Mary Ball is a criminal outcast. She gained notoriety as the last criminal hanged in Coventry in 1849, after her conviction for the murder of her husband. At a time prior to the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act, when divorce was still restricted to the wealthy, requiring an act of Parliament, her troubled marriage forces her to seek an unlawful way out of an untenable situation, making her both a rebel and an outlaw. Her jealous and barren sister-in-law condemns her as a sinner whose evil influence will infect her own beloved daughter (see p. 205). Justice Coleridge finds her a "[b]old, brazen, unrepentant" person with "the same shameless disdain for Christian decency he had so often seen in the insurgents and rioters" (p. 248). In this true crime study entitled *The Life, Trial and Hanging of Mary Ball* (2011) Bob Muscutt provides us with many intriguing details of her last days with journalistic fidelity, and the text is a good supplement to his fictional account of Ball's tragedy. Like Eliot, Ball too is a victim of patriarchal violence and subject to the abusive men in her life, restricting her autonomy and independence.

In Eliot's life, her domineering brother Isaac repeatedly ignores her "independence" and terms it as "stubbornness, defiance, selfishness" (p. 31). Chrissey, her elder sister, says nearly the same thing though in a much more appreciative way when she confesses:

> If I were a man there's not a woman on earth I'd prefer to my sister. She is caring and tender. So strong and good. She's a rebel – just like Satan, Isaac says. But he's just afraid because she has the strength to oppose him. I haven't […] She can think with her heart as well as with her brain. (p. 36)

Maria Lewis also perceives Isaac's powerless vehemence towards her talented younger sister: "He resorted to all kinds of tricks to impose his will on his little sister. He knew that she was far cleverer than he was" (p. 12). Eliot's recalcitrant selfhood provokes and unsettles her egotistical brother but inspires her meek sister. In the case of Ball, her distinctiveness in a plebeian society makes her an equally disturbing presence, as confirmed by John Astley: "there was something different about Mary. Everybody who knew her noticed it. Some frowned on it, some hated it, others were afraid of it" (p. 5). He also finds her "a pert girl, then as an unusually alert and independently minded young woman, eager to learn from her own experience of life" (p. 117). A similar opinion is voiced by her lover William Bacon: "*Sometimes I feel her knowledge of life, real life, is superior to mine, despite all I have read. She is sharp-witted as well as handsome*" (p. 120, original italicised). But her brutal husband never feels for her or appreciates her resilience and courage. Muscutt is invariably careful in deciphering those aspects of these two women's characters and lives that make them stand out in the crowd.

Eliot is seen as constantly struggling within her middle-class family and in the literary world to assert her talent and individuality. Similarly, Ball tries hard to establish her selfhood in a poverty-ridden household and lower working-class world. One striking aspect of both these narratives is their detailed treatment of the explicit scenes of domestic violence – physical, verbal and psychological. The heated and tense arguments between the two belligerent and egocentric siblings, Eliot and Isaac bring out the darker side of the Victorian bourgeois family, so often idealised as a domestic idyll. Isaac is also responsible for the death of his father in the sense that he encourages the use of laudanum as prescribed by Dr Bury, much against Eliot's wishes. In this respect, his cunning violence shortens his father's last days to capture all his property by deceiving his sisters. Isaac deprives both of his sisters by forcing his dying father to sign a will of convenience.

In the case of Ball, the scenes are much more overtly violent, involving her husband's brutalisation of her body and mind on a regular basis and precipitating her final (according to Muscutt) indirect involvement in his death. For example, when Thomas brings a whore into their home, Ball experiences her first assault – "the clumsy debauchery" (p. 78) – as an expression of her husband's "natural brutality of something fierce and angry inside him" (p. 74), and Ball's response gradually hardens into "a passive indifference to silent contempt and hatred" (p. 74). Such scenes recur at regular intervals as when, in an especially fierce confrontation, Ball almost kills Thomas by throwing a stone at him (pp. 97-99). There are also several instances of marital rape, and it is in one of these forced moments of male lust and mutual disdain that the only surviving child of the couple, Lizzie, is conceived. Ball's moments of self-questioning are intensely expressive of the irony of the husband-wife bonding:

> She recalled falling asleep in the serene and stupid belief she was free! So free that a man she hates could walk in, ravish her and then fall asleep as if nothing had happened. She tried to remember Constable Haddon's exact words about a husband's rights and a wife's duties. (p. 114)

Another vital aspect of Victorian society that Muscutt repeatedly criticises is the sexual double standards of nineteenth-century law. Isaac misuses the property laws to his own ends and reduces his sisters to penury, leaving the eventually widowed Chrissey at his mercy and forcing Eliot to earn a living for herself. By manipulating the inheritance of their family houses – Griff House and Bird Grove – and by using "the language of property" (p. 34), he virtually precipitates the suicide of Chrissey's husband Edward. Eliot's good friend, Charles Bray, as "odious" (p. 49) and "intransigent" (p. 50), makes fun of Isaac by suggesting that Eliot would write a novel about him entitled "*She Didn't Consult Him!*" (p. 75). Isaac even declines to give his father's books to Eliot, knowing full well how she would value them, inviting her criticism that only he is "capable of such a despicable gesture, such a mean abuse of power" (p. 94). Moreover, Eliot feels intimidated when Isaac "signal[s] generously to me to take a seat in the house where I had grown up" as "more a gesture of ownership than hospitality" (pp. 109-110). Years later, she would base the character of Tom

Tulliver in her novel *Mill on the Floss* (1860) in part on her domineering brother to show how the paradigms of children's growth within a family are determined unequally on the basis of gender and differential property rights. In this respect, Muscutt appears somewhat didactic in trying to make Isaac the melodramatic villain. But if read between the lines, Isaac is far too complicated to be directly detected as the reigning devil in his sister's life.

As an underprivileged woman, Ball also struggles to come to terms with the coercive and misogynistic Victorian marriage laws. She is warned and admonished by Constable Haddon when her husband reports her for resisting his right to sexual fulfilment: "These are things you can't change; things nobody can change. They're in the scriptures, they're laid down by law. Accept them. Like everybody else does" (p. 101). The humanitarian grounds are completely lost when Ball, having experienced the agony of several children's deaths and her husband's relentless aggression, is admonished for resisting marital rape: "Give in? He's your husband. He has his rights. And every wife has her duties, Mary" (p. 100). The lopsided nature of Victorian marriage laws is such that women remain unprotected victims, enabling Thomas to threaten Ball with denying her the company of her child if she chooses to abandon him.

Law and domestic politics might be in their disfavour, but these two women, though belonging to completely different classes and social milieus, exercise a sexual freedom quite at odds with stereotypical Victorian feminine normativity and equally reflective of their defiant natures. Eliot maintains a very frank relationship with the unconventional and licentious Charles Bray, which bothers both Isaac and the puritanical Miss Lewis who finds their conversations regarding "methods of avoiding pregnancy and disbelief [in God]" (p. 28) indecent. Though she is not shown to have any explicit sexual relationship with her first publisher, the womanizer George Chapman, Eliot nearly crosses the bounds laid down for maintaining sexual propriety of middle-class women by bargaining for Chapman's attention in full presence of his wife and mistress. Finally, she accepts an illicit affair with the married George Henry Lewes and makes a radical sexual choice as a free-thinking creative woman, proving to her elder sister that Victorian women could choose "a fourth way" (p. 113) over spinsterhood, or a marriage for love or convenience. Ball, on the contrary, gets much more sexual licence as a lower class woman, exploring sexual pleasures with a certain Henry long before her marriage, much inspired by the whore Nancy,

her "extrovert and experienced" friend (p. 53). Initially traumatised by repeated child-deaths and a loveless marriage, she is drawn to her lover William Bacon with an admixture of passivity and willingness that finally culminates in a sexually fulfilling romance. Her frigid sister-in-law Jane always finds her sexuality disturbing and attempts to restrict Ball's voluptuousness in a drab and dark dress resembling the "heavy robes of respectability and plainness" (p. 130). Ball does not conform to the conventional sexual reticence expected of Victorian women and moreover asserts that "it is bad to be a respectable woman" (p. 47) like her mother, virtuous but unhappy.

Apart from disagreeing with the patriarchal constraints against female sexual liberty, these two women question the Christian religion in significantly disturbing ways. Eliot's response is too well-known to be ignored, and Muscutt imaginatively represents how spontaneously she opposed the Christian concept of God in her scenes with Mary Lewis, a fact that embarrasses her father and annoys her brother, who complains of the bad company she keeps. In response to her dramatic resistance to confession in the prison, Ball is mentally and physically tortured by the prison's chaplain. She does not see herself as a sinner in the eyes of God but truly unfortunate for not being able to see her daughter again, rejecting a false pretence of repentance for what she implicitly regards as self-defence against untenable abuse (p. 275).

Transgressive as Eliot and Ball prove at every point, they are unusually drawn towards literacy and education as means of female emancipation. They desire to acquire bookish knowledge available mostly to Victorian men to violate rigid gender binaries. For her intellectual cravings Eliot is, in her father's words, "a woman of the future" (p. 38). Both he and his authoritative son Isaac fail to engage her into "more womanly pursuits than becoming learned" (p. 11). Charles Bray only has praise for her "remarkable" genius and her command over languages as various as Greek, Latin, Italian, German, Spanish and French (p. 55), but as "an obscure young woman from the provinces" (p. 56), she irritates her brother with her "intellectual excavations" (p. 56). Eliot's literary and critical talents are duly recognised by her two respective lovers – the eminent London publisher Chapman and later the critic Lewes. Her attraction for the comic absurdities of the German "fantastic Professor Bookworm" (p. 62) and even for Herbert Spencer are deeply linked with her

desire for intellectual compatibility. In the case of Ball, literacy is a major issue, and her desire for it makes her accept the romantic company of William. After acquiring only minimal literacy her success in reading the mature prose in Charlotte Brontë's popular novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) is a symbolic act through which Muscutt tries to indicate her empathy with the struggles of the novel's heroine in a patriarchal society. Her literacy also enables her to read and write letters (see pp. 192, 195, and 209), an act of correspondence inaccessible to her earlier.

On the whole, both these novels underscore the aggression and repression characterising Victorian patriarchy and how the two women protagonists struggle against these inimical forces. With touches of family melodrama and sentiment, the author brings out the complicated aspects of domestic sexual politics that appear typically 'neo-Victorian' in their revision and re-invention of the sparks of Victorian feminist rebellion. The novels are not exceptional in terms of their form, but the content is appealing for presenting an easily hackneyed version of oppressed femininity with fresh conviction.

Muscutt manages to add value fictionally to the already known biographical facts about George Eliot and Mary Ball's lives by his neo-Victorian imaginative re-contextualisation of some of the very crucial and intimate domestic encounters of their lives and their psychic responses to them. But he is also very careful to write as fairly and sympathetically as possible, so that it becomes difficult for the reader to detect that he is writing about the controversial lives of his opposite sex. Taken the recent spate of interest in the lives of Victorian celebrities namely Darwin, Dickens, James and Wilde among others, these kinds of biographical historical fiction are expressive of the neo-Victorian desire to access privacy of Victorian pasts that often startlingly contradict the official metanarrative of famous nineteenth-century lives and bring to the forefront the ruptures between historical knowledge and fictional imagination.