

Representation of Anti-Feminine Mental Habits in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*

Chayanin Nuamphummarin

Faculty of Arts

Chulalongkorn University

Email: chayanin.cnr@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article situates *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) in nineteenth-century theories of the mind, particularly the implications of psychological theories of habit on gender. Significantly, “anti-feminine mental habits,” the term I have coined here, refer to mental habits in female protagonists that contradict the psychological writings of major nineteenth-century psychologists, who typically assigned to women traits that served to degrade them while elevating the status of men as the superior sex. In fact, William James, Herbert Spencer and Henry Maudsley—all major figures in nineteenth-century psychology—agreed that women were more susceptible to mechanical thoughts and actions than men, contributing to the prevailing binary opposition that pitted feminine mental weaknesses against masculine mental powers. Additionally, mental habits that were considered feminine all placed women far below men in terms of free-thought, free will and originality. I argue that, in an attempt to rewrite misogynistic nineteenth-century physiological psychology and refute prominent evolutionary theories proposed by major mental scientists, George Eliot created a female protagonist in *The Mill on the Floss* who possesses superior mental habits, namely a spirit of enquiry, independence of mind, and suspense of judgement (as opposed to hurried judgement).

Keywords: female protagonists, theories of habit, nineteenth-century psychology, anti-feminine mental habits, mental scientists

After approaching the novels of Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, James Hogg, Thomas Hardy, George Meredith and Elizabeth Gaskell with psychological theories in the nineteenth century, Michael Davis (2011), writer of one of the most influential books on Eliot and psychology entitled *Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Psychology: Exploring the Unmapped Country* (2006), claims that she is “most closely in touch with new theories of mind” (p. 502). Hence, her works, both the early and later novels, are most conducive to the study of the effect that the

psychological writings in the nineteenth century had on literature. As far as *The Mill on the Floss* is concerned, I have employed psychological writings to analyse the novel in two distinct ways. First of all, psychological writings that were published before the novel like Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology*, which Eliot read after the first edition was published in 1855 (Davis, 2006, p. 50), could potentially have a direct effect on how she characterised male and female characters. Eliot was even considered to be "a disciple of Spencer rather than Darwin" (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 6). On the other hand, psychological writings that were published slightly after *The Mill on the Floss* or even long after Eliot's death can be used as an approach to understand the position of women in regard to their brains and mental faculties in the long-nineteenth century. The psychological writings that came afterwards can also attest to how visionary Eliot was in crafting female characters who defy all the negative, undesirable mental traits imposed upon them by psychologists, especially James, who published *The Principles of Psychology* decades after *The Mill on the Floss*.

Furthermore, central to the "nineteenth-century philosophical, scientific and, later, evolutionary theories of individual character formation" are the Victorian notions of habit (Judge, 2013, p. 158). With habit being instrumental in how the character of individuals is formed, major authors of the period actively engaged with "the power of habit" (Mill, 1869/2015, p. 153) in their own ways. Indeed, both Eliot and her contemporaries—including Charles Dickens, George Meredith and Henry James—"reflect Victorian interest in, and anxieties about, habit's characterising force" (O'Toole, 2013, p. 30). Furthering various important works on habit and its effects on individuals' traits, this paper centres around the relationship between gender and habit made obvious by Eliot's characters, particularly Maggie Tulliver, one of her best known heroines. Significantly, it sheds light on how nineteenth-century feminine mental habits—typical traits thought to be inherent in most women and, by extension, female characters—placed women at a great disadvantage, driving Eliot to create wilful female characters to call into question the gendered claims contemporary mental scientists made against women's faculties. Unlike the minds of typical women as described in nineteenth-century psychological writings, Maggie's mind is flexible and inoculated against repetitive, rigid thoughts, which are typical feminine mental habits claimed by psychologists that suggest women's inability to have independence of thought.

Defining Habits and Some Notions of Feminine Mental Habits

The definition of habit pertaining to my central argument and used especially in psychology describes habit as "an automatic, 'mechanical' reaction to a specific situation which usually has been acquired by learning and/or repetition" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Such a perception of habit as automatic and mechanical thought and behaviour is the basis of how women's

mental habits were thought of in the period and women's mental faculties were deemed as inferior to men because the female sex is more prone to "habit-based" thoughts—a term used by Jennifer Judge (2013) in her research on habit and gender.

Major nineteenth-century physiological psychologists—including Herbert Spencer, William James and Henry Maudsley—generally argued that, compared to women, men can avoid repetitive or habit-based thoughts or actions more easily due to their bigger, more sophisticated brains (Judge, 2013, p. 161). Accordingly, the disadvantaged social status of women and the reduction of women to a biologically deprived class of people was rendered as undeniable truth rooted in human civilisation by "the natural laws of habit" perpetuating women's presumed inferior mental faculties, creativity and free will (Judge, 2013, p. 161). In fact, how inferior women's faculty is to men's is exemplified in James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890/1931):

A young woman of twenty¹ reacts with intuitive promptitude and security in all the usual circumstances in which she may be placed. Her likes and dislikes are formed; her opinions, to a great extent, the same that they will be through life. Her character is, in fact, finished in its essentials. (pp. 368–369)

In other words, James (1890/1931) believed that women's thoughts run more mechanically as their character is already set at such a young age, thus concluding that "woman's intuitions . . . are seldom first-rate in the way of mechanics" and that "woman is the unreasoning animal" (p. 368). Men, on the other hand, are gifted with a mind that is flexible, one that is free from such restricting rigidity. The way James perceives women's traits here actually reflects notable psychological writings in the long nineteenth century, including Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) and Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Psychology* (1855).

A naturalist, Darwin also contributed greatly to psychology and that Eliot was familiar with his works cannot be denied, not least because "as a member in her own right of the same circle of scientists, journalists, novelists and other public figures . . . Eliot met Darwin several times" (Davis, 2006, p. 48). Moreover, Eliot's participation in the works of her life partner, George Henry Lewes, "would have kept Darwin's theories strongly in her mind through much of her career as a novelist" since Lewes's works frequently respond to those of Darwin (Davis, 2006, p. 48). In fact, Lewes's essay entitled "Mr. Darwin's Hypotheses," in which Darwin's key ideas such as Natural Selection are discussed extensively, was published in four parts in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1868 (Secord

¹ It is important to note that the heroine of the novel is also a young woman of about twenty years of age.

et al., 2022, p. 104). Echoing misogynistic evolutionary theories in *The Descent of Man*, Darwin (1871/1889) justifies the differences between men and women by basing them on his analysis of animals “which present other secondary sexual characters” (p. 563). In fact, if everyone is convinced that “the bull differs . . . from the cow, the wild-boar from the sow, [and] the stallion from the mare” (Darwin, 1871/1889, p. 563), women, too, are inferior to men by the same logic. Darwin also indicates that “intuition,” “rapid perception,”² and “imitation,” all of which suggest “habit-based thought” (Judge, 2013, p. 178), are not only more prevalent in women than men but these particular qualities of women can also be found in the “lower races” and “a past and lower state of civilisation” (Darwin, 1871/1889, pp. 563–564). Hence, for Darwin, women are closer to animals than to men.

Herbert Spencer (1855) also furthered the belief in female inferiority in his theories of habit that form the core of his *The Principles of Psychology*. Spencer postulates that one of the great disparities between the two sexes is the tendency to hesitate and, for him, while men hesitate, women do not, suggesting their inferior nervous systems. In this sense, hesitations become important in Victorian theories of habit as they can make actions become less habitual. To twenty-first-century readers, the notion that hesitations are preferable and that lacking them is considered a failing might seem counterintuitive as the current, one that is familiar, definition of hesitation is “a pausing or delaying in deciding or acting, due to irresolution” (Oxford University Press, n.d.) which is why the absence of hesitation here equates hurried judgement—the tendency to come to conclusions without hesitating or thinking carefully, similar to “rapid” perceptions referred to above. Consequently, women, compared to “the smaller-brained races,” are quick to “draw conclusions and retain more pertinaciously the beliefs once formed” (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). By contrast, men—linked to “the larger-brained races” and implied to have a sophisticated nervous system—display “a relative marked premeditation” or “suspense of judgments” (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). In other words, Spencer firmly believes that women completely lack the ability to exhibit “suspense of judgments.” Such assertions will be called into question later since hesitations, which equate somewhat paradoxically with carefulness in decision making, contribute to a large part of Maggie’s psychological make-up.

The binary opposition between “the smaller-brained races” and “the larger-brained races” indicates that Eliot, in *The Mill on the Floss* at the very least, has been mostly in dialogue with Spencer. An avid reader of Spencer’s *The Principles of Psychology*, Eliot acknowledged in 1954 that he “will stand in the Biographical Dictionaries of 1954 as Spencer, Herbert, an original and profound philosophical writer, especially known by his great work . . . which gave a new impulse to psychology” (1954, p. 165). Nevertheless, Eliot did not agree with

² This might seem like a positive personal trait to possess but rapid perception can be linked with premature conclusions or lack of premeditated thought.

Spencer that the mind of an individual, especially a female, can be approached with “any one simple biological or psychological model” (Davis, 2006, p. 52). Therefore, she departed from Spencerian evolutionary theories which posit that men’s mental life is superior to women’s because they have bigger brains and, reversing such assertions, Eliot, conscious of the mid-century psychological theories that put great emphasis on the brain’s implications on sexual differences, portrays Maggie as one of the larger-brained races.

Espousing the belief in feminine mental weaknesses, Henry Maudsley (1867) proclaims that the thoughts and actions of the female sex, which is often likened to brutes or children, are “almost perpetually produced by their present pleasure or their present pains” (p. 105). Moreover, Maudsley posits that “woman has no honourable outlook but marriage in our present social system” and that because woman’s character has been formulated with “that chief aim,” “it has been made feeble by long habit of dependence” (1867, p. 203). After emphasising “the habit of dependence” as the chief feminine trait, Maudsley asserts further that “[women’s] sexual life has been undesignedly developed at the expense of the intellectual” (1867, p. 203), echoing Spencer’s notion of women as the “smaller-brained races.” Since women’s inferior mental characteristics are based primarily on their disadvantaged biological features, certain traits assigned to the feminine mental habits are treated as fixed reality. However, George Eliot subverts contemporary psychological writings in *The Mill on the Floss* to counteract such assertions of feminine weaknesses, which will be discussed in the section below.

Spencer and Maudsley’s fixation on the woman’s brain also reflects the assertion on the inferiority of women’s brains made by James Crichton-Browne (1892), one of the leading psychiatrists of the period. Prior to the discussion of the brain in an article that exemplifies the debate on the effects of the anatomy of the brain on sexual differences from the mid to late nineteenth century, Crichton-Browne outlines the differences of men and women’s mental traits, which align with the age-old binary opposition of the two sexes. While men are “more wilful, enterprising, passionate, and energetic,” their female counterparts are “more receptive, tranquil, affectionate, and constant” (Crichton-Browne, 1892, p. 409), contributing to the agreement shared by the leading mental scientists that women are more passive and rigid, an imitator rather than originator, a creature marked with consistency in thought throughout her life rather than one that undergoes development.

Since a great disparity in the intellect of men and women correlates with differences in both the “mass and weight” of the brain, Crichton-Browne, relying on “the results of the weighing of the brains of a large number of insane persons,” postulates that “in all peoples and races without exception, the absolute weight of the entire brain is, on the average, greater in men than in women,” despite supporters of “women’s rights” claiming that the differences in the brain of men and women can be attributable to their height (1892, p. 949). Apart from the

differences in brain size, Crichton-Browne also highlights the areas of the brain of the two sexes in which the largest amount of blood is circulated to assert further that “the region of the brain which in men is most richly flushed with blood is that which is concerned . . . in volition, cognitions, and ideo-motor” (1892, p. 950). In contrast, that same area for women is “mainly concerned with sensory functions” (Crichton-Browne, 1892, p. 950). Refuting what seemed to be undeniable science of her time, Eliot characterises Maggie as possessing independence of mind and being more wilful than her brother, who becomes more rigid as he ages.

Though there seems to be strong agreement on feminine mental habits among the major mental scientists, one major figure, John Stuart Mill, in Victorian thought and culture disagreed vehemently, which is why Eliot’s novels align more with the latter. Even though Mill was not a psychologist as such, he made significant contributions to nineteenth-century psychology, questioning the validity of the psychologists’ ideas in regard to women’s faculties and mental habits. Specifically, Mill, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), attacks psychological writings on women’s inferiority, postulating that “psychological laws of the formation of character have been so little studied, even in a general way, and in the particular case never scientifically applied at all” (1869/2015, p. 471). Diverging from Darwin, James, Spencer and Maudsley, Mill asserts that “the mental operations of men might be expected to be slower, [and] they would neither be so prompt as women in thinking, nor so quick to feel” (1869/2015, p. 470). Moreover, “[men’s brains] would be more persistent in the line first taken; it would have more difficulty in changing from one mode of action to another” (Mill, 1869/2015, p. 470), which implies that men are prone to “[retaining] more pertinaciously the beliefs once formed” (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581)—a direct response to Spencerian evolutionary theories.

Mill also anticipated Crichton-Browne’s article (1869/2015) on the inferiority of women’s brains and cast serious doubt on the notion of men having much larger brains than women and whether brain size always correlates positively to crystallised intelligence: “it is by no means established that the brain of a woman is smaller than that of a man” (p. 469). Moreover, if brain size is the be-all and end-all of the efficiency of mental operations, “a tall and large-boned man must on this showing be wonderfully superior in intelligence to a small man, and an elephant or a whale must prodigiously excel mankind” (Mill, 1869/2015, p. 469). Mill subsequently cites anatomists, who assert that brain size “varies much less than the size of the body,” meaning that “some women have as large a brain as any man” (1869/2015, p. 469). It should also be noted that the scientific study conducted by Crichton-Browne on the size of women’s and men’s brains relied heavily on the brains of *deceased lunatics* who died of brain diseases, so the applicability of such a study on normal, functioning individuals should be regarded with some scepticism. With such strong disagreement with both Spencerian evolutionary theories and the study on brain size, Eliot’s *The Mill on*

the Floss diverges from the consensus among the leading psychologists of her time and is more in dialogue with *The Subjection of Women*.

Literature Review

Athena Vrettos's research article entitled "Defining Habits: Dickens and the Psychology of Repetition" (2000) is crucial to the study of theories of habit in the nineteenth century since it examines how Dickens, especially in *Dombey and Son* (1848), incorporates habit in his work to not only give social critique but also offer advice on how to overcome habitual tendencies that hinder personal development. Vrettos postulates that, in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens attributes "the sterility of social relations" to business routines, which convert mankind into "clockwork machinery" (2000, p. 417). For instance, Mr. Dombey's hard-working, honest clerk laments that "habit is all I shall have to report, when I am called upon to plead to my conscience, on my death-bed" (Dickens, 1848/2010, p. 477). As habit can take total control of one's conscience, one must find a way to "break the grip of routine" (Vrettos, 2000, p. 418), and in order to do that, one needs to sympathise with others.

Significantly, because old habits can impede "the susceptibility, impressionability, and self-extension of sympathy," Dickens believes that "habit and sympathy are antithetical": that is, sympathy allows individuals to project themselves onto the circumstances or even the mind of others, thereby disrupting inflexible mental habits (Vrettos, 2000, p. 419). Moreover, Dickens, as a social commentator, proposes the social implications of individuals' "sympathetic identification" with others who seem markedly different from them (Vrettos, 2000, p. 419). In fact, when Florence Dombey, Mr. Dombey's daughter, is able to identify or sympathise with those from different socioeconomic classes, rigid class structure and "the mass production of the mind" are challenged (Vrettos, 2000, p. 419). Hence, Vrettos's research sheds light on Dickens's treatment of sympathy not only as a tool to break away from certain habits but also a crucial element in changing the status quo.

Expanding on Vrettos's significant contribution to the study of habit in Victorian realist novels, Jennifer Judge (2013) proposes to unveil the *gendered* aspect of some nineteenth-century theories of habit: she asserts that George Eliot, in *Middlemarch*, undermines the gendered presumption of "evolutionary physiological psychology" (p. 170), particularly the fact that the mind of the female sex is more susceptible to "passive, instinctive forms of habits" (Judge, 2013, p. 159). Applying theories of habit as an analytical approach to *Middlemarch*, Judge emphasises two types of habits. Associated mainly with women, the first type of habit includes traits like impulsiveness and lack of complexity (i.e. superficiality), all of which constitute mechanical, automatic tendencies. In contrast, as mentioned previously, psychologists like Spencer posit higher forms of habit characterised by thoughts and feelings that are non-

mechanical and “comparatively-hesitating” (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 584), and this particular form of habit—dubbed “the questioning habit”—is claimed by Spencer to be disproportionately pronounced in men (Judge, 2013, p. 162; Spencer, 1897, p. 133). Nevertheless, rewriting the psychology of her time, Eliot applies a role reversal in *Middlemarch* and attaches higher forms of habit to both major and minor female characters, while the key male characters are portrayed as habit-based creatures, displaying a lower form of habits characterised by the negative, supposed feminine traits mentioned earlier.

Sean O’Toole also participates in the debate surrounding Victorian habit in *Habit in the English Novel, 1850-1900: Lived Environments, Practices of the Self* (2013), which aims to uncover “a distinctly literary contribution to the nineteenth-century psychology of habit” (p. 30). For O’Toole, Victorian notions of habit are inextricably bound up with the realist novel. Significantly, habits are important because they can pinpoint the most specific character traits (O’Toole, 2013, p. 21). However, habits also complicate the notion of self, prompting one to ask, “what it means to have a character and to be an individual in the modern age” (O’Toole, 2013, p. 21). Therefore, since one of the most crucial functions of the Victorian novel is to record “the individual’s formation in the midst of inescapable social forces,” the realist novel is then regarded as the highest form of the novel (O’Toole, 2013, p. 22). Victorian realist novels are also conducive to the study of habit because they engage with early psychological studies; hence, the Victorian realist novel is not only “the representative artistic form of the period” but also “[seems] so surprisingly modern” (O’Toole, 2013, p. 22). With the selected works of multiple notable Victorian authors, including *Little Dorrit* (1857), *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), *The Lifted Veil* (1859), *The Egoist* (1879) and *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897), O’Toole concludes that “habit is the impetus of narrative, a necessary ground, and a formal concern” (2013, pp. 30–31), emphasising how fundamental habit is to the most popular form of fiction in the Victorian age.

Interestingly, O’Toole’s work also reaffirms my observation that habit has always been gendered through his analysis of Victorian conduct books. Significantly, he postulates that Sarah Stickney Ellis’s *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character, and Responsibilities* (1842) accentuates how habit can help reinforce women’s roles in the domestic space. In fact, Ellis wants to terminate “selfishness, indolence, and vanity” in women while also cultivating “benevolence and habits of industry,” which “are blended with Christian meekness”: consequently, women can “[afford] pleasure to all who live within the sphere of their influence” unconsciously (Ellis, 1842, p. 10). In other words, habit can be used to assign gender roles to the female sex, making women internalise such roles *automatically*.

Among the scholars who have participated in exploring the psychology of habit is Kristie M. Allen, who treats theories of habit as the standards against which Victorian English realist novels should be measured. Allen (2013) argues

that Eliot—in *The Mill on the Floss*—presents habit as “the primary and intricate mechanism that constitutes identity and occasions moral growth” (p. 838). Nevertheless, *The Mill on the Floss* does not solely focus on the development of its characters when they change from being egotistic to altruistic; rather, “imaginative experience”—one gained from “reading fiction,” as evidenced in Maggie’s reading of the novel entitled *Corinne*³—has become “a means to develop new cognitive skills”⁴ (Allen, 2013, p. 838). In fact, imagination is believed by Victorian physiological psychologists to complicate connections in the human brain, stimulating and ameliorating both nervous systems and sympathetic tendencies or the tendency to sympathise with others (Allen, 2013, p. 838). The importance of imaginative experience is also inextricably bound up with the concept of mental differentiation proposed by George Henry Lewes. He argues that “the exercise of an organ” makes “its structure [become] differentiated”; the modifications occurring after such a process is crucial to “our moral no less than our intellectual aptitudes” as it helps facilitate not only “more energetic reaction” but also “new modes of reaction” (1874, p. 117). Since the act of reading and the imaginative experience attached to it can lead to the exercise of a very important organ (the brain), it can reasonably be inferred that reading can bring about significant changes upon individuals, the most important of which is “sympathetic tendencies” (Lewes, 1874, p. 117). In the subsequent discussions, given the importance of reading and imaginative experience to the development of cognitive skills or the brain itself, I will illustrate how Maggie Tulliver, by having mental habits that are deemed as masculine by nineteenth-century psychologists, gains what she believes as real wisdom through the reading of *The Imitation of Christ* (1418-1427) by Thomas à Kempis—a “hugely influential spiritual handbook” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 502), which is well-known among Victorian readers of Eliot’s time. Though *The Imitation of Christ* is not fiction by any means, its significance on the heroine’s cognitive skills cannot be denied.

Major Argument

This article deals with anti-feminine mental habits as represented in *The Mill on the Floss*. It will show how Maggie’s habits of mind are considered anti-feminine, when compared to feminine mental habits formulated by major mental scientists in the nineteenth century, which turned the spotlight on women’s intellectual weaknesses. Moreover, it will show that feminist critics, who have been very critical towards Eliot’s body of work because she failed to address the

³ *Corinne* is a novel by Madame de Staël and was originally published in French in 1807. It is about Oswald, Lord Nelvil and the heroine Corinne who fall in love with one another. However, Nelvil is thwarted in his attempts to ask for Corinne’s hand as she is considered an “unconventional” woman (Atkinson, 2015, p. 503).

⁴ Cognitive processes suggest “the acquisition and use of knowledge” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.).

Woman Question⁵, overlook the intellectual journey that Eliot's female protagonists like Maggie have made and the mental habits that they have evinced. Specifically, such detractors often wonder "why . . . the choices faced by women in [Eliot's] writings seem to lack the boldness that might be expected—even desired—of her" (Flint, 2019, p. 137). Such a question, mentioned by Kate Flint in "George Eliot and Gender" in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, actually reflects how second-wave feminists viewed Eliot's fiction, particularly Kate Millett (1934–2017) and Ellen Moers (1928–1979), who faulted George Eliot for not granting her female protagonists, like Maggie, Dorothea or Gwendolen, a radical lifestyle that resembles the one she shared with Lewes and for failing to show "a public commitment to feminism" (Hadjiafxendi, 2013, p. 138). Consequently, for these critics, the question is: "why should a woman who herself possessed extraordinary intellectual powers; who had a remarkably broad grasp of historical, philosophical, scientific and literary issues; and whose relationship with George Lewes transgressed Victorian convention, be so apparently conventional in many of her views?" (Flint, 2019, p. 136–137). Given Eliot's conservatism, such a question might seem valid at first glance, but it actually overlooks the novelist's "broad grasp of . . . literary issues," one of which is her attempt to make her female protagonists unconventional with a mind powered by faculties that are usually deemed *masculine*.

In addition, Paxton (1991/2016) proposes further that feminist critics attempted to pigeonhole Eliot: those who relied on "political activism in the public sphere as a touchstone regard Eliot as a failed feminist," whereas others "who read her description of women's places in Victorian society as a conservative prescription" considered her as "antifeminist 'intellectual'" (p. 10). Diverging from the feminist critics who "regard Eliot as a failed feminist" simply because Eliot's female protagonists do not make *bold* decisions like leaving their husbands and never looking back⁶, I want to focus on Maggie's unconventional or "innovative spirit" (McDonagh, 2019, p. 90), which can be attributed to her superior mental faculties and her subsequent mental habits that I consider anti-feminine. This type of female protagonist can lead to a new conclusion in a feminist reading of *The Mill on the Floss*—one that can debunk what seems to be the consensus among feminist critics that Eliot is an "anti-feminist intellectual" (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 10) and propose instead that she cared deeply about women's issues, especially women's education. In other words, this article departs from the assertion that Eliot abandoned the Woman Question entirely; therefore,

⁵ The term refers to a campaign advocating women's rights that reached its zenith in the 1850s and successfully sparked off a debate on not only women's roles but also their place in society (Hadjiafxendi, 2013, p. 137).

⁶ One of Eliot's female protagonists, Romola, decides to leave her husband, Tito, but reconciles with him a few chapters later, which is regarded as "one of the most disheartening moments" in all of Eliot's fiction (Flint, 2019, p. 136).

she does not warrant the labels “antifeminist ‘intellectual’” or “failed feminist.” Instead of these two negative terms, the term “anti-feminine” is better suited to the way the novelist characterises her female protagonist in *The Mill on the Floss* and frees her from the supposed feminine mental traits found in contemporary psychological writings.

Furthermore, my central focus on mental habits rather than other types of habits is derived from the fact that Eliot is aware that “assumptions about gender roles are so ingrained as to form part of individuals’ automatic mental reflexes” (Flint, 2019, p. 140). In fact, Spencer’s discussion of reflexes—a term employed extensively by his contemporary physiological psychologists to refer to “an automatic, habitual, or instinctive action or response” (Oxford University Press, n.d.)—is actually *gendered*: he claims that once reflex actions become more complex, “there arise more numerous hesitations”—an indication of those who have well-developed nervous systems as hesitations suggest suspense of judgement (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). Since women are considered to have less developed nervous systems, they have a tendency to “draw conclusions [quickly]” and “retain more pertinaciously the beliefs once formed” (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). Hence, Maggie’s unconventional mind, Eliot’s acknowledgment of the sexual stereotypes on both sexes’ mental reflexes and the mental scientists’ assertions on female mental habits inform my decision to pursue this topic.

Ultimately, this article attempts to contribute to the scholarship that concerns itself with the relationship between nineteenth-century psychological writings and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* by putting greater emphasis on the mental habits of Victorian men and women as prescribed by contemporary mental scientists and the ones that appear in *The Mill on the Floss*. It subsequently becomes clear that the mental habits of men in the novel, including Tom and his father, resemble the traits assigned to women by the mental scientists such as rigidity of the mind. Maggie, on the other hand, possesses superior faculties, including free will, free-thought, and originality, and mental habits, including her spirit of enquiry, independence of mind and a tendency to hesitate, many of which were assigned to men’s psychological make-up in the psychological writings cited here. The detailed discussion of three distinct anti-feminine mental habits below also marks my departure from Judge’s article on gender and habit, which focuses almost exclusively on the female characters’ *questioning habit*. Additionally, because Maggie’s mental faculties and habits are desirable and contrastive with the feminine mental habits outlined in the works of the physiological psychologists, particularly Spencer whom Eliot is mostly in dialogue with in *The Mill on the Floss*, I consider her mental habits anti-feminine. It should also be made clear here that a female protagonist having anti-feminine mental habits is not necessarily *masculine*; she just exhibits desirable mental habits that nineteenth-century psychologists believed to be disproportionately present in men’s brains.

Discussion

The Mill on the Floss, which was published after the commercial success of *Adam Bede* (1859), is a powerful story that follows the lives of two siblings, Maggie and Tom Tulliver, who have to navigate their life through trials and tribulations: misfortune befalls the two siblings in their teenage years as their father, Mr. Tulliver, loses both a lawsuit and Dorlcote Mill, an estate that the Tullivers have called their home for many generations, to Mr. Wakem, a cruel lawyer. The breakdown of the siblings' relationship occurs when Maggie, now 17 years of age, is secretly orchestrating a rendezvous with her lover Philip, the sole heir of Mr. Wakem. The siblings continue to grow apart as the novel progresses: while Tom keeps working, 19-year-old Maggie now works as a schoolteacher. Another turning point in the story occurs when Maggie has eloped with Stephen Guest, her cousin's suitor, and become a Fallen Woman, who supposedly "has lost her chastity, honour, or standing, or who has become morally degenerate" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)—this is an unfair assessment due to Maggie's superior moral authority shown in several episodes including one in which she resists Stephen's advances—a very important episode that will be discussed to accentuate another anti-feminine mental habit of Maggie.

This incident makes Tom reject Maggie and cast her away. The siblings reunite during the great flood, and they subsequently drown, dying in each other's arms. Because the novel culminates with the death of Maggie and her brother, the ending can be considered "deeply pessimistic," one that resists the imminent changes (McDonagh, 2019, p. 90). Moreover, Kate Flint (2019) postulates that *The Mill on the Floss* can be considered as an "anti-Bildungsroman" because rather than "taking its young male protagonist to maturity, sophistication, and adequate worldly compromise," the story "leads Maggie to an uncompromising moral triumph" (p. 148). Since Maggie's *inner* Bildung is quite apparent throughout the novel, the final section of this article will also argue that *The Mill on the Floss* can be classified as a female Bildungsroman, one that involves the protagonist's maturity through her faculties and mental habits. In spite of the sad ending, my focus on Maggie's mental faculties and the mental habits derived from those faculties offers an alternative reading that refutes the accusation that Eliot is a "feminine anti-feminist" (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 10), an unfair assessment of her body of work, especially *The Mill on the Floss*. It is also important to note that the selected works of mental scientists discussed here, though published after *The Mill on the Floss*, serve as a continuation of age-old misogynistic attitudes regarding women's minds that had been widespread throughout the nineteenth century.

Education and Maggie Tulliver's Spirit of Enquiry

The way the heroine introduces herself to education anticipates what kind of a woman she is going to become as the novel progresses—a woman that is capable of exhibiting free will, free thought, and originality. Maggie's education deserves a section of its own because “the only identifiable feminist issue on which [Eliot] seemed to take a clear . . . stand was that of education” (Flint, 2019, p. 138). In fact, the examples of Eliot's subtle advocacy of women's education range from Maggie Tulliver's thirst for knowledge to Dorothea Brooke's decision to marry Casaubon to fulfil her intellectual aspirations in *Middlemarch* (1871). The juxtaposition of the nature of Maggie's thoughts and what the men in the novel expect her to be highlights Eliot's response to “evolutionary physiological psychology” (Judge, 2013, p. 170) of her time that places women's mental powers far below men. Right from the start, Mr. Tulliver proclaims that being a girl places Maggie at a serious disadvantage in many respects: for example, he is convinced that if Maggie were a “lad,” “she'd ha' been a match for the lawyers” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 19). Hence, Maggie's biological sex is considered by her father to be a deciding factor whether cleverness is a positive or negative trait. Mr. Tulliver also goes on to justify the way in which he has chosen his wife. That is, he picked Elizabeth Dodson as his life partner simply for two different reasons: Mrs. Tulliver's tendency to be “a bit weak,” and his intolerance to being “told the rights o' things by [his] own fireside” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 19). In other words, Mr. Tulliver entirely attributes his judgement in matrimony to two of the socially prescribed qualities a Victorian woman is expected to have: submissiveness and intellectual weakness, the latter of which is claimed to be especially common in women by contemporary mental scientists (Darwin, 1871/1889, p. 564; James, 1890/1931, pp. 368–369; Maudsley, 1867, p. 203; Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581).

Moreover, because Maggie is smarter than Tom, Mr. Tulliver laments that “it seems a bit a pity [that] the lad should take after the mother's side instead o' the little wench” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 12). He becomes worried about Maggie since “an over-'cute woman's no better nor a long-tailed sheep,—she'll fetch none the bigger price for that” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 12). An acute or “over-'cute” woman in Mr. Tulliver's dialect is one who “[has] subtle or quick discernment” or one who is “penetrating, keen, sharp-witted, shrewd, clever” (Oxford University Press, n.d.). This is a reference to the nineteenth-century marriage market: Mr. Tulliver fears that Maggie's cleverness would seriously undermine her marital prospects. Hence, women's tendency to be intellectually weaker than their male counterparts is not only postulated to be true by male-dominated Victorian society but is also considered a desirable trait in the works of major physiological psychologists mentioned above. Significantly, my reading of *The Mill on the Floss* can prove wrong the notion of women's inferior mental faculties asserted by Maggie's own father which reflects the prevailing thoughts advocated by the nineteenth-century mental scientists, showing instead that, because of her

faculties, Maggie's mental habits are anti-feminine. That is, they contradict such habits of minds that leading scientists from the mid to late nineteenth-century deem to be feminine.

Because I argue that Maggie's faculties can be attributable to her anti-feminine mental habits, it is necessary to discuss the meaning of free thought, free will and originality that will subsequently serve to describe the female protagonist's unconventional mind—one that is conducive to the aforementioned faculties. First of all, free-thought or free-thinking is defined as "independence of thought," especially "the free exercise of reason in matters of religious belief⁷, unconstrained by deference to authority" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Secondly, free will, which Maggie evinces, is "spontaneous or unconstrained will," "unforced choice," and "inclination to act without suggestion from others" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Moreover, the term originality, or inventiveness, used in this article refers to "independent exercise of one's creative faculties" and "the power of originating new or fresh ideas or methods" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). By possessing all of these mental faculties or mental powers, Maggie's mind becomes unconventional, powered by anti-feminine mental habits, including a spirit of enquiry, independence of mind and hesitation.

To allow her mind to be conducive to the mental habits mentioned above, Maggie needs proper education—which is incredibly difficult for women in Victorian society. Even if education was available to a privileged girl like Mary Ann Evans herself, it was relatively limited, when compared to the kind of education men had access to. Indeed, Frederick R. Karl wrote in *George Eliot, Voice of a Century: A Biography* (1996) that "although [her father] was indulgent and permitted a much higher degree of education for his obviously intelligent daughter than most young women received, he was traditional in the way he perceived her and her future" (p. 8). In fact, Mary Ann Evans was expected to follow in her mother's footsteps by being "a strict disciplinarian in the home" and "a person who was efficient with her children and husband and brooked no opposition in her domestic role"; obviously, for a singular mind like Mary Ann Evans, a future like this one was nothing but "imprisonment" (Karl, 1996, pp. 7–8). The limited prospects of women's intellectual life are subtly underscored by another male character in the novel. According to Mr. Stelling, Tom's tutor, women are inherently incapable of engaging with the usual subjects that men study. Teasing Maggie, Tom asks his tutor to support his belief that girls or women cannot learn Latin grammar or mathematics, and Mr. Stelling does more than that when echoing the Victorian psychologists' thoughts on women's faculties: "[women] can pick up a little of everything . . . [have] a great deal of superficial cleverness . . . [but] couldn't go far into anything [because] they're . . . shallow" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 141). In fact, Mr. Stelling's derogatory remarks

⁷ Religious beliefs will be key to the development of Maggie's mind.

against women align with major mental scientists in the period. His attitudes are consistent with the portrayal of James, Spencer, Darwin and Maudsley's women, whose "sexual life has been undesignedly developed at the expense of the intellectual" (Maudsley, 1867, p. 203) and who are portrayed as the "unreasoning animal" (James, 1890/1931, p. 368), the "lower races" (Darwin, 1871/1889, p. 564), "the smaller-brained races" (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). Maggie, by having free thought, free will and originality, does not fit into such descriptions, and because of those faculties, her mind is able to resist being "made feeble by long habit of dependence" (Maudsley, 1867, p. 203). Though the novel was published before any of these works, Eliot was able to create a prototype of a female character with a mind independent and original enough to refute the claims on the negative traits assigned to women's minds.

Since psychological mechanisms, which refer to thoughts that run automatically and do not require volition, are often painted in a negative light by the physiological psychologists in the Victorian era, that "woman's intuitions . . . are seldom first-rate in the way of mechanics" (James, 1890/1931, p. 368) suggests serious limitations on women's free will, free thought and originality. However, Maggie is one of Eliot's female protagonists who can prove otherwise. Since the world is against her, Maggie must find a way to gain access to the knowledge exclusively reserved for her brother and the members of his sex, and the opportunity does indeed present itself. After Mr. Tulliver has lost his estate, to say that the lives of the Tullivers have been turned upside down would be an understatement, and the most affected individual in the household seems to be 13-year-old Maggie. As the narrator puts it, "all the favourite outdoor 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] every affection, every delight the poor child had had, was like an aching nerve to [Maggie]" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 265). Hence, Maggie seeks both a remedy to an aftermath of her family's downfall and "some explanation of this hard, real life,—the unhappy-looking father, seated at the dull breakfast-table; the childish, bewildered mother . . . ; [and] the cruel sense that Tom didn't mind what [Maggie] thought or felt" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 265). She is convinced that "real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew" would lead directly to "secrets of life," thereby beginning to engage in what is considered by her society to be *masculine studies* (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 265). This is the beginning of Maggie's intellectual journey that shapes a highly intelligent woman she is about to become. As this section will show, she is capable of having originality, free thought and free will; the last two are considered superior forms of habit (Judge, 2013, p. 162) and are what constitutes what Spencer refers to in his *Principles of Sociology* (1897) as "the questioning habit" (p. 133). In this article, expanding from Spencer's notion of the questioning habit, I argue that Maggie has a spirit of enquiry—a mental habit that Maggie possesses and Tom lacks.

Furthermore, it is important to note how Maggie's preoccupation with masculine studies and her subsequent religious ecstasy occurring after the reading of *The Imitation of Christ* accentuate her tendency to display free thought, free will and originality. Because of Mr. Tulliver's financial disaster, Tom is forced out of school to help with the family's situation, and his schoolbooks are delivered to him afterwards, allowing Maggie to study "Latin Dictionary and Grammar, a Delectus, a torn Eutropius, the well-worn Virgil, Aldrich's Logic, and the exasperating Euclid" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 266). Interestingly, Eliot describes Maggie's attempts to acquire what she terms "masculine wisdom" as "illusions of self-flattery," which suggests that Maggie persuades herself "into a falsely high opinion of [her] own achievements, powers, or influence" (Oxford University Press, n.d.). Maggie is also described to "[fill] her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of the syllogism . . . [feeling] a gleam of triumph now and then that her understanding was quite equal to these peculiarly masculine studies" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 266). At first glance, this particular episode would indicate that Eliot agrees with her contemporary physiological psychologists that women are indeed "smaller-brained" creatures (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). However, judging from Eliot's stance on women's education, that is not the case.

By describing that a path towards masculine wisdom is "thirsty, trackless, uncertain" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 266), Eliot undermines the validity of such masculine studies that help perpetuate glaring disparities between the two sexes. Besides, Maggie's ability to realise that "the relation between [masculine studies] and this living world was extremely remote for her" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 266) suggests that once she has access to the set of knowledge that is deemed unfathomable to women, she understands that even that unfathomable knowledge cannot save her from the inner life she is currently living. In addition, Eliot dismisses masculine studies or classical subjects mostly learned by men because of their misogynistic nature. Prior to Maggie's direct engagement with masculine studies, she actually visits Tom at his school. Though "it was a very happy fortnight to Maggie" due to the fact that "she was allowed to be in the study while he had his lessons," the episode was not perfectly blissful since "the astronomer who hated women generally caused her so much puzzling speculation that she one day asked Mr. Stelling if all astronomers hated women" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 141). It is clear that Mr. Stelling instils in Tom's mind "a most emphatic lesson about feminine inferiority" (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 80), and it should come as no surprise that masculine studies do not contribute to Maggie's intellectual growth as they represent "the pervasive misogyny that operated to exclude women" from education (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 80). Hence, Maggie's departure from masculine studies does not suggest the heroine's weaknesses; on the other hand, it suggests that she has a mind strong enough to decide that those classical subjects are quite impractical for her current situation and cannot enhance her cognitive skills.

Despite not being allowed the same kind of education provided for her more privileged brother, Maggie's mind operates well enough to enable her to conclude that the classical knowledge gained recently through self-study is not applicable to or useful for her inner life. Maggie's ability to disregard Mr. Stelling as well as what he generally teaches to young men and subsequently opt for another route emphasises one of Maggie's mental habits that are anti-feminine—a spirit of enquiry, which contrasts sharply with the feminine mental habits advanced by James, Spencer, Darwin and Maudsley. By dismissing masculine studies, which is exemplified by Mr. Stelling's curriculum, and discovering her own truth, Maggie denies "his unexamined elitism" and "his authoritarian pedagogy" (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 79), rooted in masculine studies that women are excluded from.

Once Maggie acknowledges that masculine studies is not a panacea for her harsh intellectual life, she directs her attention to something entirely different: *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. To Maggie, the most significant piece of advice found in *The Imitation of Christ* is the fact that Christians must "forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 269). After finding what she regards as the ultimate wisdom she has been seeking, which is self-renunciation, Maggie "drew a long breath and pushed her heavy hair back, as if to see a sudden vision more clearly" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 269). Ultimately, through her attempts to access "real learning and wisdom," Maggie is able to uncover "a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 269). Indeed, for Maggie, "renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain" (Eliot, 1860/2015, pp. 269–270). She also acknowledges that she has not only experienced "a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things" but also "insight, and strength, and conquest," all of which can be "won by means entirely within her own soul" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 269). Contrary to contemporary mental scientists' claims, Maggie's mind is evidently shown as readily conducive to the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge, thus debunking all claims postulated by major mental scientists mentioned earlier that emphasise women's lack of free thought, free will and originality, and by showing these three faculties, Maggie proves that she possesses a supreme mental habit—a spirit of enquiry, which allows her to undergo rapid intellectual development and guards her against rigidity.

In the episode where she reads *The Imitation of Christ*, the faculties that are conducive to Maggie's spirit of enquiry—free thought, free will and originality—are shown clearly. The fact that Maggie opts for self-renunciation—a very serious religious belief for a 13-year-old provincial girl—should be enough to allow the readers or sceptical feminist scholars to conclude that one of the mental faculties in women that Eliot champions is a tendency to exhibit free thinking. As defined previously, free thinking refers to "the free exercise of reason

in matters of religious belief” that is not restricted by “deference to authority” (Oxford University Press, n.d.) —a definition that fits perfectly with Maggie’s mind. By dismissing the importance of masculine studies and opting instead for self-renunciation, Maggie challenges the type of education misogynistic men, including Mr. Stelling and her father, approve of. It is also worth noting that Maggie’s religious quest is one that she has accomplished without the help of “established religious authorities” (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 84), emphasising her independence of mind, another anti-feminine habit that will be discussed below.

Additionally, when one is capable of showing free thought, the very existence of one’s free will cannot be doubted, as the two traits correlate strongly. How can Maggie lack free will when she is certain that self-renunciation is her best way out of misery, a conclusion reached and decided upon by a 13-year-old girl’s mental faculties? Moreover, originality, too, has to be present in Maggie’s psychological makeup, especially when free thought and free will are already there. That Maggie chooses renunciation to alleviate her poorly prepared intellectual life made so by her father’s bankruptcy that abruptly ends her education is as original as one could possibly get from a Victorian heroine—one created by a female author who waged a religious war against her father by refusing to go to church with him (Bodenheimer, 2019, p. 22), and originality is also crowned as “the highest intellectual faculty” by Spencer (Judge, 2013, p. 166; Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 534). Since women during the Victorian era were not expected to lead an intellectual life, that Maggie can engage in the pursuit of profound knowledge emphasises her singularity when compared to other Victorian heroines, such as Jane Eyre and Tess of the d’Urbervilles—all eponymous heroines, who, despite being bold, lack anti-feminine mental habits. In fact, Maggie, by possessing free thinking, free will and originality, possesses inquisitiveness, which allows her to see the world differently and have an unconventional mind. Rather than having the same opinions throughout her life or “retaining” firmly the beliefs that are already formed (James, 1890/1931, pp. 368–369), Maggie’s spirit of enquiry allows her to deviate from what is expected of her intellectually.

Moreover, Maggie’s religious experience is included here because it is crucial to the debate on women’s education in the Victorian era. In fact, it is argued that through *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot “demystifies gender difference” when it comes to education; that is, Eliot “saw sex differences not only as determined by biological function but also as constructed by profoundly misogynistic cultural traditions and ideologies” (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 71), and misogyny can also be traced in psychological writings by James, Spencer, Darwin and Maudsley whose theories of habit are gendered to place women far below men. The prominent figure who was totally against women’s education is none other than Spencer himself—Eliot’s lifelong friend with whom she frequently exchanged ideas during the composition of her novels. Significantly, in *The*

Principles of Biology (1864), Spencer postulates that, due to their reproductive system, girls do not possess enough energy to engage in advanced study (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 71), dismissing women's education on the misogynistic ground of physicality. In fact, Spencer, in *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1896)⁸, emphasises the adverse effects of education on girls, while he believes that boys are simply built for it. Spencer wrote, "being in great measure debarred from those vigorous and enjoyable exercises of body by which boys mitigate the evils of excessive study, girls feed these evils in their full intensity"; as a result, a disproportionately low number of girls "grow up well made and healthy," and the rest are "pale, angular, [and] flat-chested" (Spencer, 1896, p. 278). The reliance on biological differences to dismiss women's education here also reflects Crichton-Browne's article mentioned previously.

Specifically, Crichton-Browne, after highlighting how inferior the woman's brain is to the man's, outlines what will happen to high school girls who have been victims of "overpressure" inherent in school. "When the hardest part of the day's work falls on an already jaded brain" (1892, p. 951), many schoolgirls reported that they experienced headaches. Crichton-Browne then claims that there should be a reduction in the number of hours these girls can spend on their homework: "no girl from 10 to 17 years of age should have any forced brain work to do after 7 P. M., and that a reduction is required in the number of hours that high school girls are now called on to give to brain work" (1892, p. 952). Moreover, with their inferior brains and overpressure in school, it is typical, according to Crichton-Browne, that these girls complain that "their power of acquisition and attention is impaired; that they take far longer to do their work than they used to do; that they cannot remember what they have learnt; [and] that they read their lessons without understanding them" (1892, p. 952). Therefore, it is Crichton-Browne's belief that "to throw [women] in competition with men . . . is to insure to them a largely increased liability to organic nervous disease" (1892, p. 953). Obviously, these claims against women's education are made possible solely on the grounds of physicality, and, as a final blow to end women's higher education, Crichton-Browne attacked the University of St. Andrews for its decision to "open all its classes in arts, science, and theology to women," for he believed that the university, by doing so, "has taken, not a retrograde step—for our ancestors never did anything so foolish—but a downhill step towards confusion and disaster" (1892, p. 954). In other words, women's education, especially in university, should have never happened in the first place—an abomination and an insult to the ancestors. Nevertheless, the fact that Maggie can pursue both masculine studies and theology, the latter of which proves to be especially successful since it helps her unlock real learning and wisdom and gives

⁸ The chapter entitled "Physical Education," which primarily discusses women's and men's education, was initially published in *British Quarterly Review* in April 1859 (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 240), one year before the publication of *The Mill on the Floss*.

her a new purpose in life, can be interpreted as a way in which Eliot not only promotes women's education but also highlights women's potential and intellectual readiness in receiving education, as shown in Maggie's tendency to begin one intellectual quest after another.

Eliot's firm stance on women's education is where an agreement between Mill and her is reached. Maggie is far superior in terms of mental life to both her father and brother: she is more wilful and evinces both faculties and mental habits that enable rapid intellectual development, whereas both Mr. Tulliver and Tom, like their male ancestors before them, succumb to patrilineality, especially in regard to the transmissions of the male Tullivers' most rigid mental trait mentioned earlier: dogmatism, as opposed to Maggie's spirit of enquiry and independence of mind, to be discussed below. Interestingly, the negative effects of patrilineality are also present in *Middlemarch* as Judge underscores how Lydgate, the progressive doctor, "walked by hereditary habit" (Eliot, 1871, p. 217), and such hereditary habit does suggest rigidity of the mind to a great extent. Hence, when choosing his wife, Lydgate adheres to "the established order" (Eliot, 1871, p. 217) used when he chooses his furniture. Fittingly, for Mill, men's thoughts, not women's, are "more persistent in the line first taken" (1869/2015, p. 470), while "women's minds are by nature more mobile than those of men" and "more fitted for dividing their faculties among many things than for travelling in any one path to the highest point which can be reached by it" (1869/2015, p. 468). Accordingly, if women "chance to be as well provided as men are" (Mill, 1869/2015, p. 462) in terms of their education, they will be "better furnished than men in general with the essential requisites of skilful and successful practice" (Mill, 1869/2015, p. 463). On the other hand, Mill believes that men tend to fail to accurately evaluate "the facts which they are called upon to deal with" because they only see "what they have been taught to expect" (Mill, 1869/2015, p. 463), emphasising rigidity as the chief masculine habit instead of feminine. Hence, even though Eliot did not sign a petition that would champion women's rights to vote (Flint, 2019, p.139), her characterisation of her female protagonists resembles the feminine mental habits proposed in *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

To leave out Mary Wollstonecraft in a discussion such as this one on women's education would be a mistake, and Eliot's representation of her female protagonist's education in *The Mill on the Floss* aligns with Wollstonecraft's plea for women's education. Not only does Eliot suggest women's intellectual readiness through Maggie's experience in engaging with both the socially-prescribed *masculine studies* and theology but she also agrees with Wollstonecraft in regard to women's intellectual freedom and, by extension, their education. Specifically, Eliot, reflecting on *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), wrote in her essay entitled "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" that "we want freedom and culture for woman, because subjection and ignorance have debased her" (1855, p. 989). To prevent women from becoming both ignorant and

debased, an improvement in women's education has to be secured, one that does not "encourage a vicious indolence and inactivity, which we falsely call delicacy" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2008, p.108). Indeed, citing an example from Thomas Day's children book *The History of Sandford and Merton* (1783), Wollstonecraft agrees that "if women are in general feeble both in body and mind, it arises less from nature than from education" (1792/2008, p.108). Interestingly, regarding women's feebleness in the mind, such a statement places more weight on education rather than the weight and mass of the female brain, casting doubt on physiological psychology that emphasises the woman's brain as the deciding factor of women's mental life. Moreover, rather than training the minds of women "by the severer principles of reason and philosophy," the establishment "[breeds] them to useless arts" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2008, p.108). Women subsequently learn "nothing of an higher nature than a few modulations of the voice, or useless postures of the body"; consequently, "their time is consumed in sloth or trifles, and trifles become the only pursuits capable of interesting them" (Wollstonecraft, 1792/2008, p.108). Hence, the type of education that is more suitable for women is one that improves their rational faculty or one that involves reading texts that can awaken their latent faculties, as shown clearly by Maggie's reading of *The Imitation of Christ*, which allows her to exhibit free will, free-thought and originality, superior faculties usually assigned to men's brains.

Superior Mental Habits Realised by the Independence of Mind and Tendency for Hesitation

Another mental habit inherent in Maggie's mind that makes her distinctly different from how women are perceived by James, Spencer, Darwin and Maudsley and from Eliot's portrayal of the male characters in the novel is her independence of mind. It is important to note that independence of mind here refers to "freedom from external control or influence" or "lack of deference to authority, insubordination" (Oxford University Press, n.d.)—a mental habit Maggie evinces throughout her life as can be seen in such key events as when she defies her mother, refuses to conform to Victorian notions of femininity and sympathise with those who are supposed to be her enemies, which will be closely examined below.

As far as independence of mind and the lack of it are concerned, Eliot links Maggie to the former and Tom to the latter through her discussion of the complexity of nature, which, in Eliot's view, "has the deep cunning which hides itself under the appearance of openness" (1860/2015, p. 31). Consequently, though "people think they can see through her quite well," the reality is that "she is secretly preparing a refutation of their confident prophecies" (1860/2015, p. 31). By the same token, Eliot suggests that under Tom's plain appearance, which is like "one of those lads that grow everywhere in England" (1860/2015, p. 31), nature hides her most inflexible traits. Specifically, even though Tom has a

physiognomy “in which it seems impossible to discern anything but the generic character of boyhood,” he represents “some of [nature’s] most rigid, inflexible purposes, some of her most unmodifiable characters” (Eliot, 1860/2015, pp. 31–32). This is one of the earliest scenes in the novel where Tom, who has just returned home from school, is introduced, and Eliot sets the tone for the type of male character Tom is going to become: a rigid and inflexible man, who depends on certain maxims to navigate through life and have no intention to change them. As a result, Tom has “no pity” and “no sense of [his] imperfection” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 322), remaining inflexible throughout his life. Maggie, on the other hand, is described as “a dark-eyed, demonstrative, rebellious girl” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 32), signalling the different path Maggie is going to take in her life. As will be shown in this section, this “rebellious girl” will demonstrate superior mental habits, having a far more independent mind than her brother.

One of the early incidents marks the beginning of her characteristic willpower and independence of mind. During Maggie’s younger years, her hair has often been criticised by her mother as it is dark and “won’t curl” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 13), unlike her cousin Lucy, whose hair is blonde and curly, conforming to contemporary beauty standards. In fact, it is argued that Mrs. Tulliver, adhering to the Victorian ideal of femininity and therefore showing deference to authority that subtly denotes her dependence on external influence, attempts to “transform her daughter into a miniature version of the asexual Victorian lady, with artificially curled hair, a lace tucker and an unpocketed, uncomfortable dress” (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 76). However, in the episode discussed below, Maggie refuses to look like a typical Victorian young woman, challenging prevailing ideas of femininity imposed on the female sex and refusing to fit in the mould of women who submit to what society deems appropriate.

When the two siblings are visited by their aunts and uncles, Mrs. Tulliver commands Maggie to “go and get your hair brushed, do, for shame” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 60). Maggie, as a protest against Mrs. Tulliver’s fixation on how she should style her hair, defiantly cuts it in a hideous fashion, which can be considered as “the triumph . . . over her mother and her aunts by this very decided course of action” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 61). Maggie’s desires are clear: “she didn’t want her hair to look pretty . . . [but she] only wanted people to think [of] her [as] a clever little girl” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 61). Unlike the ideal Victorian girl represented by Lucy, Maggie, at nine years old, can see beyond rigid Victorian beauty standards and does not value them. Instead, she prioritises cleverness over outer appearance—a mode of thought that is markedly different from that of her mother. This is how independent Maggie’s mind is, which is clearly at odds with what James asserts about the mental habit of a young girl, “whose feminine method of direct intuition . . . can vainly hope to cope with” the masculine mental powers. Such masculine powers are characterised by “the absence of prompt tendency in [men’s] brain” and “the very lack of preappointed trains of thought,”

both of which allow “the masculine brain” to “deal with any new and complex matter” (James, 1890/1931, pp. 369). In this episode, having an anti-feminine mental habit, which is independence of mind, allows Maggie to depart from typical Victorian women like her mother and her aunts.

Another example showing Maggie’s freedom from external influence in the realm of Victorian femininity is her reluctance and rejection to engage with the patchwork. Sewing is considered as one of the feminine accomplishments, and young girls are expected to take up sewing or patchwork. However, nine-year-old Maggie rejects it outright: “I don’t want to do my patchwork” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 13). Going against Mrs. Tulliver’s notion of “pretty patchwork” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 13), Maggie remarks that patchwork is “foolish work,” involving “tearing things to pieces to sew ’em together again” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 13). This is Maggie’s departure from rigidly formed ideas of femininity, which is made possible by her independence of mind; with such a mental habit as her guide, she does not wish to fit into the mould of typical Victorian women like her mother, her cousin or her Aunt Glegg, who is particularly rigid. By contrast, activities that Maggie perceives as worthwhile are exemplified by her habit of “[reading] the books and [understanding] ’em better nor half the folks as are growed up” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 17). In fact, one of the books Maggie read when she was just nine years old is Daniel Defoe’s *History of the Devil* (1726). Though Mr. Riley, Mr. Tulliver’s friend who gives horribly wrong advice for Tom’s education, believes that *History of the Devil* is “not quite the right book for a little girl” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 17), it is actually quintessential Maggie, indicating how unique her mind is and how conducive it is to the cultivation of anti-feminine mental habits. This early scene sets the tone for the life of the heroine, who rejects traditional feminine accomplishments and has a thirst for “real wisdom” instead.

Moreover, another episode that showcases Maggie’s tendency to be guided by her independence of mind occurs after Tom finds out about the secret meetings between her and their enemy’s son Philip. When Tom discovers his sister’s secret schemes, he forces her to swear on the Bible not to see Philip again. In fact, after Tom forces her away from Philip, Maggie’s “pent-up, long-gathered irritation burst into utterance” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 321):

Don’t suppose that I think you are right, Tom, or that I bow to your will. I despise the feelings you have shown in speaking to Philip; I detest your insulting, unmanly allusions to his deformity . . . [You] have been always sure you yourself are right. It is because you have not a mind large enough to see that there is anything better than your own conduct and your own petty aims. (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 321)

Such reproaches can be interpreted as Eliot responding to the evolutionary theories of her time. Indeed, since Spencer disseminated the belief that

women are biologically inferior and goes so far as to compare the female sex to smaller-brained races, Maggie's bitter reproaches aimed at her brother can be considered Eliot's attempts to debunk the myth of feminine mental habits that are thrust upon women.

Ironically, Tom hardly bears any resemblance to the larger-brained races; in fact, Maggie contends against Tom's unreasonable behaviour by saying that he lacks "a mind large enough to see that there is anything better than [his] own conduct and [his] own petty aims" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 321). Here Eliot refutes evolutionary theories proposed by contemporary mental scientists that men's brains, by extension their mental habits, are more sophisticated than women's, thereby challenging the assertion that men can steer clear of repetitive, rigid thoughts due to their more evolved brains. In fact, Maggie's remarks on Tom's mind, which she reckons is not large enough for him to have good judgement, reflect Eliot's serious doubts on the "biological law" in Spencer's own interpretation of one of the famous sentiments of the period: "the survival of the fittest" (Spencer, 1864, p. 444). As a matter of fact, Tom's attempts to gain mastery over his sister are made possible not because of his superior faculties or mental habits, but his tendency to assert "aggressive dominance" that is attributable to "patriarchal privilege" (Paxton, 1991/2016, p. 85). Hence, by agreeing to swear on the Bible, Maggie does not simply "bow to" Tom's will because he is intellectually superior to her. She complies because Tom is "a man," "has power," and "can do something in the world" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 322). In other words, Maggie has to obey Tom in this one instance because she needs to survive on the margins in a male-dominated society, and Maggie's reluctance to yield to Tom's will, along with her emphasis on how small his mind is, further indicates how strong-willed and independent she is.

In addition, this particular episode, apart from debunking Spencerian evolutionary theories in his psychological writings, can also be situated in the debate of hereditary habits. With limited mental resources to correct his dogmatic behaviour, Tom has a habit of "reproaching other people all [his] life" with the misplaced confidence that he has always been in the right (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 322). With Tom resembling the so-called smaller-brained races who "retain more pertinaciously the beliefs once formed" and lack independence of thought (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581), Maggie emerges as a much more sophisticated individual, capable of exposing his habitual follies such as his unyielding rigid character, a trait that is not supposed to be found among James' young men. This episode particularly echoes the new theories of minds because Eliot previously emphasises the two negative traits that are transmittable through the male line of the Tullivers, including a tendency to be self-destructive and be dogmatic: "Mr Tulliver's grandfather had been heard to say that he was descended from one Ralph Tulliver . . . who had ruined himself," and that "it is likely enough that the clever Ralph . . . was very decidedly of his own opinion" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p.

254). Such rigidity has been passed on to both Mr. Tulliver and Tom. Mr. Tulliver's mind is described as being "charged with an eager purpose and an unsatisfied vindictiveness"; hence, the possibility for "new feelings" does not exist (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 273). In fact, Mr. Tulliver "did not want spiritual consolation—he wanted to shake off the degradation of debt, and to have his revenge" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 273). As the old proverb goes, like father, like son, the reader can clearly see that even years after the death of Mr. Tulliver, his opinion still remains a single guiding force in Tom's life, who "held himself bound by his duty to his father's memory, and by every manly feeling, never to consent to any relation with the Wakems" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 423). Since "there is no room for new feelings" for both the father and the son, it is clear that rigid minds have no place for free will, free thought and originality to thrive. That Tom has always been rigid and lacks independence of mind is proven at this point to be a trait inherited from his ancestors, reaffirming the fact that habits are hereditary. However, Maggie is exempted from such inheritance of hereditary habits through the cultivation of anti-feminine habits previously discussed from teenage years to adulthood. Unlike Tom, Maggie is not dogmatic and does not automatically transfer the sins committed by the father to the son. Hence, she is able to overlook the long-standing family feud, feel "sorry for Philip" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 318) and steer clear of the family mistakes, evincing independence of mind, a mental habit Tom fails to acquire throughout his life. This is an example of how Eliot rewrites nineteenth-century psychology to create a heroine with a set of mental habits that apparently enables her to appear far superior to her male counterparts.

This episode of the two siblings having a row is also in line with nineteenth-century psychology. The notion of habits being passed on from parents to offspring had been established by major physiological psychologists—predominantly William B. Carpenter. In a section called "Hereditary Transmissions of Acquired Tendencies" in his *Principles of Mental Physiology* (1874), Carpenter argues that "transmission tends to increase the mischief," especially when it comes to self-destructive habits (p. 369), as evidenced in the fact that "the drunkard not only injures and enfeebles his own nervous system, but entails mental disease upon his family" (p. 370). Since transmissions of hereditary habits "increase the mischief," it is clear why dogmatism is one of Tom's most rigid psychological traits. In contrast, Maggie, immune from such habit-based characteristics, emerges as an individual who is "more capable of non-automatic . . . thoughts and emotions" (Judge, 2013, p. 162). It is important to note that non-mechanical thoughts and behaviour are traditionally believed to feature predominantly in men's psychological makeup as they evince "an easier modification of judgements that have been formed" (Spencer, 1855/1896, p. 581). However, in *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie is the only Tulliver who can resist rigidity, while Tom, like the other male Tullivers before him, fails to do so, implying Eliot's resistance to sexist nineteenth-century theories of habit.

Another very interesting anti-feminine mental habit clearly shown in Maggie's mind is the tendency to hesitate, which is championed by Spencer to be one of the superior mental habits possessed by men. It is established in the section dedicated to the feminine mental habits that hesitations are equal to "a relative marked premeditation" and "suspense of judgments," mental habits that women completely lack, according to Spencerian evolutionary theories. Nevertheless, the tendency to hesitate, or suspense of judgments, clearly constitutes a large part of Maggie's habits of mind, and the episode that showcases this anti-feminine mental habit occurs before and after Maggie has *unwillingly* eloped with Stephen.

Although the tendency for hesitation is claimed to be much more prevalent in the mind of the male sex, Maggie's nervous system is so developed that her decision-making is far better than her own father or Tom. For example, before the boat trip that decidedly shapes Maggie's fate, she is well-aware of her deep feelings for Stephen; in fact, she almost gives in to such feelings:

Maggie . . . moved about with . . . torpor of manner . . . But under this torpor there was a fierce battle of emotions . . . There were moments in which a cruel selfishness seemed to be getting possession of her; why should not Lucy, why should not Philip, suffer? . . . And when something like that fulness of existence . . . was brought within her reach, why was she to forego it, that another might have it . . . But amidst all this new passionate tumult there were the old voices making themselves heard . . . Was that existence which tempted her the full existence she dreamed?
(Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 424)

As general readers associate Eliot with the psychological depth of her characters, this is one of the best examples where her painstaking descriptions of the heroine's thoughts warrant such an assessment. Maggie is struggling internally, facing a dilemma between duty to those around her and "that fulness of existence." Maggie—who decided, at 13, to opt for self-renunciation—has been offered a glimpse into what life would be like alongside one of the town's most eligible bachelors. Consequently, she wonders why she has to suffer in silence and why others, "who perhaps needed *it* less," can continue to be content with their lives. Nonetheless, "the old voices" keeps reminding her of "all the divine presentiment of something higher than mere personal enjoyment, which had made the sacredness of life" (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 424). This is how Eliot depicts the thought processes of her female protagonist, which is not in any way simplistic but instead full of suspense of judgments used in a nineteenth-century psychological sense. By contrast, when describing Tom's mental operation that dictates how he lives his life or that of Mr. Tulliver, such description pales in comparison to the way in which Eliot narrates Maggie's internal turmoil.

In addition, even after Maggie has come to the conclusion that “her life with Stephen could have no sacredness” and that “she must forever sink and wander vaguely, driven by uncertain impulse” (Eliot, 1860/2015, p. 436), another important moment of suspense of judgments occurs again after the delivery of Stephen’s letter, in which he begs her to accept his love. The heroine’s superior mental habit is on full display yet again:

For hours every other thought that she strove to summon was thrust aside by the image of Stephen waiting for the single word that would bring him to her . . . All the day before she had been filled with the vision of a lonely future . . . And here, close within her reach . . . was another future . . . No, she must wait; she must pray; the light that had forsaken her would come again . . . she should feel again what she had felt when Lucy stood by her, when Philip’s letter had stirred all the fibres that bound her to the calmer past. (Eliot, 1860/2015, pp. 476–477)

After a long series of suspense of judgments depicted through the string of internal monologue with modal auxiliaries like “must” and “should”, Maggie allows duty to take precedence over passions. A life with Stephen would have offered all kinds of worldly happiness, yet she chooses to stand by Lucy and Philip—who represent the old voices mentioned or memories during childhood that should be cherished. These two examples seriously cast doubt on the notion that women “draw conclusions and retain more pertinaciously the beliefs once formed” and serve to illustrate effectively Eliot’s successful attempt to deemphasise Spencerian evolutionary theories.

Conclusion

The Ending and the Female Bildungsroman

As mentioned previously, because of the controversial ending, critic Flint (2019) argues that *The Mill on the Floss* is an “anti-Bildungsroman” (p. 148) because it does not fit with the traditional meaning of the Bildungsroman. However, I argue that the novel is indeed a Bildungsroman, albeit a female one that focuses exclusively on the protagonist’s *inner development*. Traditionally, the Bildungsroman is usually synonymous with the ““apprentice novel”” or ““novel of development”” (Fraiman, 1993, p. 1), and it is thought of as “an inherently optimistic form,” in which “a single, well-marked, ‘right’” path is already laid out for a male protagonist who “climbs predictably from stage to higher stage” by using such a path (Fraiman, 1993, p. 5). Moreover, the word apprentice itself suggests “youth,” “inexperience,” and “eventual mastery” (Fraiman, 1993, p. 5), which is why I believe *The Mill on the Floss* diverges from such definitions of the genre. Although the novel is not by any means an apprentice novel that “takes its

young male protagonist to maturity, sophistication, and adequate worldly compromise" (Flint, 2019, p. 148), Maggie's story is far from being an "anti-Bildungsroman," especially when her inner Bildung is spelled out quite clearly throughout the novel, from her childhood to adulthood.

With Flint (2019) representing one camp of critics who believe that *The Mill on the Floss* is an "anti-Bildungsroman," another camp of scholars views the novel quite differently and proposes instead that it is a specific type of the Bildungsroman, the "inner Bildung" (Hirsch, 1983, p. 33). In fact, Marianne Hirsch (1983), in "Spiritual Bildung: The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm," postulates that *The Mill on the Floss*, along with Theodor Fontane's *Effi Briest* (1895) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), is "part of an alternative tradition of female novels of development, a tradition which, hitherto unrecognized as such, poses serious questions about the possibility of female Bildung in the nineteenth-century novel" (p. 27). Furthermore, Maggie's Bildung is "the story of an inner growth" because it "[consists] of her unconditional adoration of her brother, her attic games, her flight to the gypsies, her adoption of Thomas à Kempis's program of renunciation" (Hirsch, 1983, p. 34), the latter of which, as previously stated, allows Maggie's faculties and one of her anti-feminine mental habits, a spirit of enquiry, to develop fully. Far from the novel of apprentice, *The Mill on the Floss* traces the mental development of its female protagonist who possesses not only superior faculties, including free will, free-thought and originality, but also anti-feminine mental habits, encompassing her spirit of enquiry, independence of thought and her tendency to hesitate. Her brother, on the other hand, is an example of a male protagonist who fails to gain mastery at the end, whether it is worldly possessions or his inner life.

Once *The Mill on the Floss* is approached as an inner Bildung, the ending does not seem so problematic. In fact, because Maggie completes her inner Bildung or shows "a development of a total individual, spiritual, moral, [and] intellectual" (Hirsch, 1983, p. 37) prior to her death, the novel already does its job as an "alternative tradition of female novels of development" (Hirsch, 1983, p. 27). Because *The Mill on the Floss* is not an apprentice novel but an inner Bildung, Maggie could not possibly fulfil all the criteria outlined above by Flint; her path is distinctly different, one that prioritises the inner life over the outer one, which is quite apparent from Maggie's unique decision to practise renunciation, which "seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain" (Eliot, 1860/2015, pp. 269–270). Therefore, when Maggie's inner Bildung, which encompasses her full display of superior faculties and mental habits, is already achieved, the fact that she dies at the end does not make *The Mill on the Floss* an "anti-Bildungsroman."

That Eliot clearly characterises Maggie with perceived masculine mental habits or anti-feminine mental habits asserted by major mental scientists of her time informs my decision to use *The Mill on the Floss* principally for its

representation of anti-feminine mental habits that is both ubiquitous and remarkable. In addition, criticism levelled against Eliot as an “anti-feminist intellectual” completely overlooks some of her female characters, who might not be as bold as Eliot herself but are definitely the opposite of typical women in the psychological writings of the period. A careful examination of *The Mill on the Floss* makes clear Eliot’s conscious attempts to subvert and rewrite evolutionary theories of the period that are incorporated in the psychological writings selected here. Rather than creating another weak female protagonist like Hetty Sorrel following such a commercial success of *Adam Bede*, Eliot gave the world Maggie Tulliver, who, by having free-thought, free will and originality, possesses superior mental habits, encompassing a spirit of enquiry, independence of mind and a tendency for hesitation considered to be a strong character trait during the nineteenth-century. A true visionary, Eliot not only debunked claims of women’s inferiority before and at the time of the writing of *The Mill on the Floss* but also those made and published long after her death, such as those demonstrated in James’s *The Principles of Psychology*.

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