Closet Addiction in Fiction: The Search for Christiana Evans

Gay Sibley

Abstract. Mary Ann Evans, who would later become the great nineteenth-century novelist George Eliot, takes up in her first three works of fiction a discussion of the use of alcohol in her own culture. However, it is in Adam Bede (1859) that a significant portion of the discussion (the alcoholism of one female character in particular) is so deliberately closeted – so backgrounded – that the structure of the text becomes a slippery portrait, not only of the extent to which the culturally pervasive alcoholism of women was persistently denied, but of Eliot’s own mother’s hidden substance abuse. An important minor character in Adam Bede, identified by more than one biographer as having a kinship to Eliot’s mother Cristiana Evans, shows all the signs and symptoms of alcoholism, a phenomenon which even the story’s narrator appears to be hiding from the reader.

Mary Ann Evans, a rural English girl who went on to become George Eliot, Britain’s great nineteenth-century novelist, is not the only author of her time and place to have written about addiction in her novels. For one, Victorian novelist William Makepeace Thackeray made excessive consumption of anything and everything the major focus of his enduring Vanity Fair (1848). As a specific example, Thackeray’s minor character Peggy O’Dowd, known mainly as the mother of two obnoxious daughters, somewhat redeems herself by having “housed and sheltered Mrs. Posky, who fled from her bungalow one night, pursued by her infuriate husband, wielding his second brandy bottle, and actually carried Posky through the delirium tremens and broke him of the habit of drinking” (Thackeray 544). And in Anthony Trollope’s Barchester Towers (1857), Mr. Thorne claims to have “had much satisfaction in drinking the noble earl’s health, together with that of the countess, and all the family of De Courcy Castle” (Trollope 139). And going back further, Shakespeare’s villainous Iago refers to the English as “most potent in potting. Your Dane, your German, and your swagbellied Hollander – Drink, ho – are nothing to your English” (Othello II, iii, 79-81). And carrying it back as far as possible, Beowulf had his mead hall. As regards the British literary “canon,” however, consumption of alcohol most frequently embeds within a backdrop of normalcy; and when consumption turns to addiction, the narrative treatment is often comedic. Finally, when alcohol does appear in tragedy – the very plot of Othello hinges upon the

Gay Sibley is Associate Professor of English at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa.

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villain’s getting Othello’s noble lieutenant drunk – it is not the alcohol itself that signals the playwright’s voice.

Although alcoholic consumption had not been denied fictional treatment, alcoholic women in fiction had not been seen as intimately connected to an author’s life. I would like to argue that George Eliot, in her earliest works, was concerned not only with incorporating the domestic use of alcohol, but that in *Adam Bede* (1859) she deliberately disguises her own mother as a fictional alcoholic, while artfully closeting that character in her narrative much as her own mother, Christiana Evans, had been closeted in life.

Two major writers set up a launching point for George Eliot’s very different narrative treatment of the use of alcohol and the subject of addiction in her early fiction. Sir Walter Scott, to whom Eliot attributes her own literary “awakening,” refers in his novels to the “Blessed Bear of Brandwardine,” the bear-shaped mug out of which the Brandwardine warriors swill liquor both before and after battle, the decanter out of which those warriors imbibe before they even get going at dawn. In Chapter 10 of Scott’s *Waverley*, for example, alcohol is portrayed as the chosen and protected drug for the warrior, similar to the treatment of Beowulf’s swaggering reign in the mead hall. Accordingly, searching for critical articles on “Alcohol Use in the Fiction of Sir Walter Scott” proves unrewarding. Nevertheless, what is new in Scott’s work is that alcohol appears at a slightly different angle, persisting as threads in a backdrop tapestry, but seen now in a different, and a more prominent light, perhaps even bordering on the satirical.

The second work leading up to Eliot’s treatment of alcohol abuse in her fiction is Anne Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). This work addresses alcoholic excess directly, as its most memorable character, Arthur Huntingdon, is a drunk. More interestingly, both contemporary and subsequent critics have generally agreed that this fictional wastrel is a biographical portrait of the Brontes’ brother, Branwell, who died of symptoms related to alcohol poisoning in the same year his sister’s book appeared.\(^1\) In her biography of George Eliot (1983), Rosemary Ashton reminds us that, in the week before the writer began her own portrait of an alcoholic, “Janet’s Repentance,” she had read Elizabeth Gaskell’s life of Charlotte Bronte, “in which,” as Ashton points out, “the effect on the Bronte sisters of their brother Branwell’s drunkenness and tyranny is unsparingly told” (Ashton 179).

What George Eliot had, then, as she began her writing career with the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1857, was a very slender literary heritage for a deconstructive treatment of addiction in fiction: a slightly heroic slant from Walter Scott added to what was perceived by nearly everyone as a personal saga from Anne Bronte. The legacy is thin. And in the case of both Scott and Bronte, and in British literary history generally, the gender of fictional drinkers is inevitably male.

The most obvious reason for the lack of evidence, both fictional and otherwise, regarding female alcoholics, both now and in the first half of the
nineteenth century, would be their need to hide. Even today, says Marian Sandmeier (1992), the “brutally harsh stigma attached to female alcohol abuse shapes the entire experience of the alcoholic woman and renders it different” from that of male alcoholics, in that “the initial response of those close to the alcoholic woman is usually to deny the problem right along with her,” partly because the problem “might be seen as a reflection on them as well” (Sandmeier 7). Nevertheless, in George Eliot’s first work, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the third “scene,” “Janet’s Repentance,” focuses almost entirely on a woman’s addiction – a rare, if not unique, narrative approach. In “The Female Alcoholic in Victorian Fiction: George Eliot’s Unpoetic Heroine,” Sheila Shaw (1986) argues that, largely because “mid-Victorians viewed the woman drinker with loathing” (Shaw 177), up until the appearance of George Eliot’s Janet, drinking women in novels had to be “1) poor; 2) depraved; 3) comical; or 4) invisible” (Shaw 172). Janet, however, is “an unhappy, battered wife… not poor, not depraved, not comical, not invisible, and not always sober” (Shaw 173). Accordingly, as a closeted female drinker, the character of Janet did not initially please everyone. Eliot’s publisher, John Blackwood, having already committed himself to *Scenes*, was unsettled by “Janet’s Repentance” and suggested that the writer tone it down: “I am sorry that the poor wife’s sufferings should have driven her to so unsentimental as resource as beer. Still it is true to nature. The case is but too common” (Haight 1954, 2: 344). Eliot’s response to Blackwood is quoted often as an illustration of the writer’s attitude toward realism: “The real town was more vicious than my Milby; the real Dempster was far more disgusting than mine; the real Janet alas! had a far sadder end than mine…” (Haight 1954, 2: 347). And Janet’s “invisibility” is relative: “Nowhere do we actually see Janet drinking,” observes Shaw (175). I would add that such relative invisibility extends to portions of Eliot’s text that were subsequently edited out. After a narrative statement that “the middle-aged inhabitants [of Milby], male and female, often found it impossible to keep up their spirits without a very abundant supply of stimulants” (Eliot 1985, 422), only in the original manuscript does the narrator go on to say that “not more than half a dozen married ladies were frequently observed to become less sure of their equilibrium as the day advanced” (Eliot 1985, 422n14).

The most elucidating portion of Shaw’s essay, however, is her observation of Eliot’s intimacy with the signs of addiction. Regarding “withdrawal,” Shaw says she has “been unable to verify that [mid-nineteenth-century physicians] knew even as much as George Eliot did… In short, the kind of details [she] describes would be known only by one who had experienced them” (Shaw 176). That Eliot was able to provide her readers with what we can only now acknowledge as clinical descriptions of addictive behavior in women enables those readers legitimately to look for equally knowledgeable clues in the behavior of characters in her subsequent work. Further, Eliot’s coming down to us through the centuries as alone in her era with such an approach to the portrayal of alcohol in literature – the focus on closeted women – can only
lead us to wonder at what drove her.

II

During the time that Robert and Christiana Evans were beginning their family, with Robert managing the Newdigate estate and Christiana tending the dairy, the use of alcohol in England was endemic. Observes Lilian Shiman (1988), in *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England*, “in entertaining friends or relatives virtually everyone, of every class, would serve some kind of alcoholic beverage” (Shiman 1). Even the clergy were accustomed to be entertained with alcoholic beverages and to receive bottles of spirits as gifts for services rendered (Shiman 43). By the 1840s a half-day on Saturday was substituted for “Saint Monday,” when factory workers were tacitly assumed to be hung over (Harrison 1994, 297). Partly as a result of alcohol’s acceptance within the culture, up to the time when “a parliamentary committee to investigate drunkenness was set up in 1834” (Shiman 15), what evidence we have for the extent of the problem exists primarily in anecdote and in fiction. Yet we do know that in the year 1831, when Mary Ann Evans was eleven years old, there was in England and Wales a licensed drinking establishment for every one-hundred and sixty-eight members of the population (Harrison 304). Because the vested interests behind the early nineteenth-century temperance movement were initially concerned with worker performance in Liverpool and Manchester factories, however, the data on alcoholic women is virtually nonexistent. Nonetheless, as Lilian Shiman points out, part of that early movement extended a special appeal to doctors because “doctors were often accused of leading women in particular to drink by prescribing spirits for any real or imaginary ailment” (Shiman 249n16).

Although George Eliot leaves behind a life history that appears abundant with documentation in the form of notebooks, diaries, letters and biographies, of her mother, Christiana Evans, we know next to nothing. Although Gordon Haight compiled 2,669 of Eliot’s extant letters in his nine-volume edition (1954), providing us with much of what we have of the author’s life from 1836 to the year of her death in 1880, within this substantial cache of letters the writer’s mother appears in only two. The second of these, to Sara Hennell in 1859, when George Eliot was almost forty and already famous, is of no consequence as the references to her mother are throwaways: “six or seven years before [my father] married my mother” and “once a journey… with my father and mother” (Haight 1954, 2: 174). And although the first letter, written at the age of sixteen to her mentor Maria Lewis, is considerably more substantive, it contains no concrete answers to a biographer’s questions. Within the space of a brief document, Mary Anne not only says that her mother’s “increase of pain” has “for the last few days been much relieved” and that Robert Evans has been subjected to “frequent bleeding and very powerful medicines,” but she also claims that the attending doctor has used up all her writing paper (Haight 1954, 1: 3). The cryptic (and somewhat flip) nature of
the communication does not provide any indication of an emotion one might expect regarding a mother who is terminally ill. But because the letter is a “lone thing,” with none before and none for two years after, and because it describes in a somewhat subordinate manner the health of a mother doomed to die within a month, this single bit of correspondence has left George Eliot scholars not only stumped but understandably curious. As Haight observed in his 1968 biography, “the very paucity of comment about her mother is suspicious” (Haight 1968, 22).

Regarding George Eliot’s puzzling relationship to her mother, those who have written on the author’s life appear to divide into two camps, the deniers and the detectives. The first and most culpable denier is John Cross, Eliot’s husband at the time of her death and her initial biographer, who in his Life of 1885 not only mercilessly edited the letters such that only a feeble representation of the author remains, but admitted as much: “Each letter has been pruned of everything that seemed to me irrelevant to my purpose – of everything I thought my wife would have wished to be omitted” (Cross 1: vi). There is likewise every indication that Cross destroyed much that he found in the journals and diaries.

In light of subsequent enquiry, it appears that Cross’s view of Eliot’s relationship with her mother is most likely an invention. Cross begins the Life with nine pages on the origins and development of Eliot’s father, Robert Evans, then inserts a page on Christiana Pearson and her family, only three sentences of which refer specifically to the “second wife,” Eliot’s mother, as

a woman with an unusual amount of natural force; a shrewd, practical person, with a considerable dash of the Mrs. Poyser vein in her. Hers was an affectionate, warm-hearted nature, and her children, on whom she cast “the benediction of her gaze,” were thoroughly attached to her (Cross 1:10).

As “Mrs. Poyser” from Eliot’s Adam Bede (1859) has been perceived as a mostly harmless and highly amusing character, this allusion appears fond. And many biographers, greater and lesser, early and late, have been inclined to adhere to this primary, benign view, and have gleaned the most positive characteristics from the novelist’s female characters in defense. Haight, however, expresses doubt: “Inferences drawn from the mothers in her novels are dangerous. “In the solicitous ones,” he argues,

the maternal is probably idealized for functional contrast. Of the others Mrs. Tulliver is most convincing when criticizing Maggie’s dirty pinafore and untidy hair;
we rarely see her soothing or consoling, and at the end of the novel, when Maggie needs her desperately, she has dwindled to a cipher (Haight 1985, 6).

Among the latter-day biographers, however, it is Ruby Redinger (1975) in her *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* who tackles most vigorously the perplexing question of the relationship between Mrs. Evans and her daughter. After observing that Cross in *Life* had been “strangely unhelpful,” Redinger points out that, “aside from the letters, he must have discarded much information about Christiana gleaned from her son and her stepdaughter, not to mention George Eliot. As a result, there is no objective evidence about George Eliot’s memory of her mother” (Redinger 38). But this lack of information did not deter Redinger from scouring the available materials in search of any evidence at all that the relationship between the mother and the daughter was not only not good, but quite bad. To this end, she can only prove that, in his portrait of Christiana, Cross was unquestionably guilty of serious misappropriations, not only of the personality characteristics of Eliot’s fictional characters, but of Eliot’s isolated remarks about mothers in general, providing not much to go on. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the alternately pleasing view of this woman – the view that displays her as a devoted and conscientious mother – depends exclusively on these misappropriations. If Mrs. Evans was supposed to have “a considerable dash of the Mrs. Poyser vein in her,” queries Redinger, “why did she not leave a more individualized memory in the minds of those who had known her – and why did those who had known her not eagerly come forward with examples of her shrewd practicality and her pithy sayings?” (Redinger 40). And on the matter of the missing letters:

In both the Cross and the Haight editions, letters from the two years following the mother’s death are missing… the period when one would expect to find the most frequent and spontaneous references to her mother. . .Obviously, someone withdrew these letters from the chance of publication. Who, and why? (Redinger 37-8)

As it happened, Eliot retrieved all the letters to Maria Lewis when the relationship had cooled around 1847. “When Mary Ann asked to have her letters back,” records Haight, “Miss Lewis said that she would lend them; but… Mary Ann refused to return them, giving them instead to Sara [Hennell], who delivered them to Cross after Mary Ann’s death” (Haight 1985, 62). In *Life*, however, Cross denies ever having had the letters: “I have not succeeded in obtaining any between 6th January 1836, and 18th August, 1838” (Cross 1: 28).

Accepting Ruby Redinger’s view of Christiana Evans as a cold and rejecting mother presents little difficulty. In addition to the two children of Robert Evans’s first wife whom Christiana had inherited, there was first Chrissey, born in 1814 and named for her mother; Isaac, born in 1816; and Mary Ann, born on November 22, 1819. However, as all the biographers note, the Evans household was by 1821 largely devoid of children. As Redinger rightly ob-
serves, “Chrissey, only five, was young to be sent off to boarding school… and Mary Ann must have started school in infancy,” since she went to Miss Moore’s school the minute Chrissey was gone (29). And by 1824, both Isaac at eight and Mary Anne at five were in boarding schools.

Haight goes John Cross one better in glossing over this premature removal of the Evans children. While Cross tells us that, with her mother “in very delicate health,” Mary Ann joined Chrissey at Attleboro, “where they continued as boarders for three or four years, coming, occasionally, home to Griff on Saturdays” (Cross 1: 11), Haight’s later biography embellishes: “Mr. Evans would come by frequently to see his ‘little wench’, and he brought the girls home for week-ends and holidays or when they were ill” (Haight 1985, 6). “Little wench” is here appropriated from Cross’s Life out of context, and is clearly designed to soften a biographical fact not otherwise easily defended. It would seem obvious to anyone that the parents had “effected an exodus of the children, so that one by one they were sent away from home, the reason always being the irreproachable one of their mother’s enfeebled health” (Redinger 29).

Other dates regarding Christiana’s decline are no more helpful. Haight quotes a July, 1835 entry in Robert Evans’s journal documenting that the husband was transporting his wife “in the little 4 wheel carriage as she is so unwell that she does not ride in the Gig” (Haight 1985, 21). The biographer then adds an obfuscating footnote: “His Journal records an earlier attack in Apr. 1831” (Haight 1985, 21n2). If the cause of Christiana’s death was “probably cancer,” as Haight and others aver, there is no logical connection between the “unwellness” that was to lead to her death seven months from the 1835 journal entry and the “attack” of 1831, since with no evidence of surgical intervention cancer would not likely, over a period of four years, be described in terms of “attacks.”

Unfortunately, Cross was thorough in his censorship. Nevertheless, and building on Haight’s suspicions and Ruby Redinger’s speculations, I think that, not only are there reasonable indications that Christiana Evans was a “rejecting mother,” but that plenty of evidence from George Eliot’s life and literature points to a mother who died early as a result of the effects of addiction. Only after Christiana Evans’s death did her children return home to live. As George Eliot had essentially been motherless since infancy, it comes as no surprise that her tutor, Maria Lewis, saw the girl as “very loveable, but unhappy, given to great bursts of weeping; finding it impossible to care for childish games and occupations” (quoted in Redinger, 77).

III
While “Janet’s Repentance” made clear that addiction was a matter of interest to this new writer, it is with Eliot’s second work of fiction, *Adam Bede* (1859), that the portrayal of alcohol in the culture becomes embedded in a much more sophisticated narrative structure. I think good reasons exist to argue that, in
this novel, the female alcoholic is as closeted within the text as carefully as such a woman would have been in real life. The character of Mrs. Poyser aside, however, it would be difficult for any reader to avoid the conclusion that the author of *Adam Bede* means to depict alcohol as a pollution leeching into the rural areas beyond the industrial towns of Birmingham and Manchester, a pollution not confined to a single, isolated housewife.

The heroine of *Adam Bede* is Dinah Morris, a traveling Methodist preacher, and the story takes place at the turn of the century, just before the Wesleyan Methodists banned women preachers in 1803. Another historical connection to the novel occurs with the association of the Methodists with the temperance movement. Although the temperance debates, which were to splinter the Methodists into “temperance” and “teetotaler” camps, did not really start having much of an effect until the 1830s (around the time of Christiana Evans’s death), the concern of the church for the drinking habits of the working class had manifested itself for decades. *Adam Bede* opens with Adam having to stay up all night to finish the carpentry on a coffin that his father has contracted to finish by the next morning. It is “th’ old tale,” says Adam, describing his father’s spending many of his evenings at the “Waggon-Overthrown,” the local public house. “If I wasn’t sharp with him, he’d sell every bit o’stuff i’ th’ yard, and spend it on drink,” says Adam. And Thais Bede’s wife Lisbeth says to Adam, “thy feyther not able t’hold a pen for’rs hand shakin” (Eliot, 1980, 85. All stand-alone page references are to this volume). “So it will go on, worsening and worsening,” continues the son, “there’s no slipping up hill again, and no standing still when once you’ve begun to slip down” (92). By morning, Thais is found drowned in the river, having stumbled there in a drunken stupor.

Numerous subsequent references to the plague of alcohol exist subsequently in this novel as well. Joshua Rann, the parish clerk and sexton, in reporting Dinah’s Methodist preaching to the Anglican Reverend Irwine, complains mostly about that church’s position on alcohol: “For them Methodisses make folks believe as if they take a mug o’ drink extry, an’ make theirselves a bit comfortable, they’ll have to go to hell for ‘t as sure as they’re born” (102). The reasonable Reverend, however, in response to Rann’s portrayal of the conversion of Will Maskery from town drunk to “the rampageousest Metho-dis” points out that “Will Maskery… used to be a wild drunken rascal, neglecting his work and beating his wife… now he’s thrifty and decent, and he and his wife look comfortable together” (103). But the good Reverend also speaks of furnishing workers “with half a sovereign to get gloriously drunk after their exertions” (107).

The most pronounced drinking scene in *Adam Bede* occurs in Chapter 24, during the twenty-first birthday party of the “young Squire,” Arthur Donnithorne, a time when “the farmers and labourers is Hayslope and Broxton” can “give their undivided minds to the flavour of the great cask of ale which had been brewed the autumn after ‘the heir’ was born, and was to be tapped on his
twenty-first birthday” (283). At this point in the story, the reader is so taken up with Arthur’s obsession with lusty dairymaid Hetty Sorrel that the amount of alcoholic consumption at the party goes pretty much unnoticed. After the dinner, when “the first draughts from the great cask of birthday ale” appear at the men’s table, Mr. Poyser begins by toasting Arthur, then Arthur toasts his grandfather, then Arthur toasts the Reverend Irwin, and then Arthur, upon the Reverend’s prompting, toasts Adam Bede. At this point, Mr. Poyser is tempted to start all over again, but instead he seeks “an outlet for his feeling in drinking his ale unusually fast, and setting down his glass with a swing of his arm and a determined rap” (314). When Arthur subsequently moves to greet the women and children at their own table, the narrator observes, “There was none of the strong ale here, of course, but wine and dessert – sparkling gooseberry for the young ones, and some good sherry for the mothers” (315). The title of the chapter, “The Health-Drinking,” is surely ironic. In an 1839 letter, written when Eliot was not quite twenty, she gives Maria Lewis a good reason to return the correspondence: “Remember Michaelmas is coming and I shall be engaged in matters so nauseating to me that it will be a charity to console me; to reprove and advise me no less” (Haight 1954, 1: 39). Haight has provided an interesting footnote regarding the “Harvest Home festivities”: “Gaiety of any sort seems to have been repugnant to GE at this time, but the account of the harvest supper in Adam Bede, Ch. 53, with the ceremony of the drinking song may suggest why” (Haight 1, 31n6). Clearly, Haight perceives Eliot’s distaste here as not only a reflection of her extreme evangelical piety at the time, but attributes her “nausea” at least in part to the robust drinking that takes place at the ceremony.

The most ironic treatment of the pervasiveness of alcohol in this text, however, occurs with Eliot’s portrait of Mrs. Poyser, the minor character whom Cross (and biographers ever since) compares to Eliot’s mother, Christiana Evans. In commenting on Thais Bede’s death, Mrs. Poyser says that he had “done little this ten year but make trouble for them as belonged to him; and I think it ‘ud be well for you to take a little bottle of rum for th’ old woman, for I daresay she’s got never a drop o’ nothing to comfort her inside” (140). No surprise is it, then, that the major crop of Hall Farm is barley, and that the Poyser household has its own “brewhouse” (130).

But the oddest hints occur in the behavior of Mrs. Poyser herself. Anyone doing research on alcoholism in women can spot its incipient signs in the mistress of Hall Farm, though she is never designated by the narrator as having a documentable “problem,” a narrative stance that can be said to mirror the community’s stance in real life. As in the case of her biblical namesake, Rachel Poyser is veiled.

Although there seems to be a general consensus that there are gender differences in the behavior of addicts, scholars and physicians who work in the field of alcohol and drugs often lament that, because nearly all the relevant statistics have resulted from studies of men, not much is known of behavior
specific to women. As a result, the documentation of such differences has
depended largely on the work of psychologists and social workers, through
interview and anecdote. Further, there is no reliable way to document that
today’s female addict, even if her behavior patterns were to be specified and
predictable, mirrors the unexplainable behavior of a character in a nineteenth-
century novel. Among the “signs and symptoms” provided by alcohol treat-
ment centers and applicable to alcoholics of both genders, however, George
Eliot’s Mrs. Poyser exhibits more than one.5

One visible characteristic of all physical deprivation in its early stages is
an edgy impatience when the gratification either isn’t there, or is come later
than anticipated. The Mayo Clinic refers to this sign as “irritability when [the]
usual drinking time nears, especially if alcohol isn’t available” (Mayo Clinic
2006). In Chapter 20 of Adam Bede, we see Mrs. Poyser’s anxiety over the
arrival of the ale: “Hetty… run upstairs, and send Molly down. She’s putting
Totty to bed, and I want her to draw th’ ale.” And in a moment: “What a time
that gell is drawing th’ ale, to be sure.” Mr. Poyser responds: “She’s drawin’
for the men too… Thee shouldst ha’ told her to bring our jug up first.” Soon,
“Mrs. Poyser’s attention [is] diverted by the appearance of Molly, carrying
a large jug, two small mugs, and four drinking cans, all full of ale or small
beer.” But Molly trips on her apron, and falls “with a crash and a splash into
a pool of beer.” At this point Mrs. Poyser launches into an assault of verbal
abuse against maid Molly that exceeds in its “cutting tone” her usual “pithy
sayings.” As Mrs. Poyser continues to rant, it seems clear to me that she
is chiefly concerned with providing a series of screaming justifications for
her unjustifiable wrath, none of which include the fact that the beer has been
merely delayed. First, it is the broken pitcher, then a spurious fear for Molly’s
safety, couched defensively, “an’ if it had been boiling wort out o’ the copper,
it ‘ud been the same, and you’d ha’ been scalded, and very like lamed for life.”
She goes on at full pitch, about how she never breaks anything, how she will
now have to resort to a rarely used pitcher, and how she’ll now have to go to
the cellar herself (272-73). The rant appears to come out of nowhere. This
scene qualifies also under another flag provided by the Mayo Clinic: “Making
a ritual of having drinks before, with or after dinner and becoming annoyed
when this ritual is disturbed or questioned” (Mayo Clinic 2006)

Two other signs listed are “drinking alone or in secret” and “keeping alco-
hol in unlikely places” (Mayo Clinic 2006). A closet alcoholic will make sud-
den and unpredictable exits from company into more private corners for the
necessary gratification. One particularly telling moment occurs in Adam Bede
when the Poyser family arrives at Arthur’s birthday celebration. Mrs. Poyser,
suddenly complaining of the heat, announces, “I shall go to Mrs. Best’s room
an’ sit down.” Her husband, in a plea recognizable to anyone familiar with
the behavior of those close to addicts, attempts to distract her: “Stop a bit, stop
a bit… There’s th’ waggin comin’ wi’ th’ old folks in’t; it’ll be such a sight
as wanna come o’er again, to see ’em get down an’ walk along all together”
In fact, “Mrs. Best’s room” seems to have a special draw. In his pursuit of Hetty, Arthur remarks that he never sees her anywhere but at church or home. “And don’t you ever go see Mrs. Best, the housekeeper? I think I saw you once in the housekeeper’s room.” Hetty insists her visit has been to the lady’s-maid, who is teaching her “tent-stitch and the lace-mending. I’m going to tea with her tomorrow afternoon” (130). However, Mrs. Poyser also accuses Hetty of “takin’ too much likin’ to them folks in the housekeeper’s room” (338). And it is Mrs. Best who suggests that the women would be more comfortable with their children apart from the men at the birthday party, where they are able to enjoy their own food and drink unobserved (301). Mr. Poyser demonstrates on another occasion his reluctance to leave his wife to herself, staying home from church to be with her. “He could perhaps have given no precise form to the reasons that determined this conclusion;” says the narrator, “but it is well known to all experienced minds that our firmest convictions are often dependent on subtle impressions for which words are quite too coarse a medium” (403).

Symptoms of withdrawal from an abused substance have been clinically documented, and Mrs. Poyser demonstrates a number of these: “mild-to-severe anxiety, unsettled mood, agitation, irritability, tremors.” Mrs. Poyser knits “with fierce rapidity, as if that movement were a necessary function, like the twittering of a crab’s antennae” (384). She also makes “a frequent clinking with her iron,” moving “to and fro whenever she want[s] it to cool” (118). Even though Mrs. Poyser does not quite sink into delirium tremens, characterized by “markedly elevated blood pressure, agitation and hallucinations,” I believe George Eliot has created a character who is very much afraid of doing so. Although the outcome of the spilt-beer scene is chiefly remembered by critics and readers for the subsequent entry of sexy Hetty, perversely costumed in the drab Methodist preaching garb of Dinah Morris, the reaction of Mrs. Poyser is surely as interesting:

Mrs. Poyser had turned round from the cupboard with the brown-and-white jug in her hand, when she caught sight of something at the other end of the kitchen; perhaps it was because she was already trembling and nervous that the apparition had so strong an effect on her; perhaps jug-breaking, like other crimes, had a contagious influence. However it was, she stared and started like a ghost-seer, and the precious brown-and-white jug fell to the ground, parting for ever with its spout and handle. “Did ever anybody see the like?” she said, with a suddenly lowered tone, after a moment’s bewildered glance round the room. “The jugs are bewitched, I think. It’s them nasty glazed handles – they slip o’er the finger like a snail.” (270-73)

We are indeed distracted by Hetty’s entrance, as we always are in this novel, but Mrs. Poyser’s response, “trembling and nervous,” exhibits an alcoholic’s terror of delusion, and her out-of-character “lowered tone” shows the reader how scared she really is. Within the narrative, there is no other logical purpose to this scene. The crisis passes, however, once “the arrival of the ale” makes “an agreeable diversion,” with talk about “the secrets of good brewing,
the folly of stinginess in ‘hopping,’ and the doubtful economy of the farmer’s making his own malt,” giving Mrs. Poyser “so many opportunities of expressing herself with weight on these subjects, that by the time supper was ended, the ale jug refilled. . .she was once more in high good-humour (275).

Another clue is Rachel Poyser’s overwhelming negativity. As Moira Plant (1997) illustrates in *Women and Alcohol*, the results of a 1994 study indicate that “those subjects who were given alcohol, as opposed to a placebo or a non-alcoholic drink, were more likely to focus on the negative areas and ignore others” (Plant 126). In male alcoholics, such negativity may frequently lead to physical violence. Although the link between alcohol and physical aggression in men has not been specifically documented, studies have determined that “aggression related to intoxication is much more difficult to ‘talk down’ or successfully intervene in than non-intoxicated aggression” (Ibid). Demonstrating a significant gender contrast, a 1991 study documents that, as an expression of negative emotions, “Women do not increase their aggression as a function of alcohol in a situation with more than one response alternative available” (quoted in Plant 127). One “response alternative” is to turn the aggression inward, as in the case of alcohol-related suicides (Plant 128). Another, of course, is verbal abuse. Grace Ketterman (1992) defines verbal abuse as “a desperate attempt to diminish [one’s own] emotional pain, at all costs” (Ketterman 139).

Verbal abuse is, of course, Rachel Poyser’s forte; she is famous for it throughout Hayslope, and the examples within *Adam Bede* are too numerous to list. In defense of herself, and making use of one of her frequent alcohol-metaphors, she says, “There’s no pleasure i’ living, if you’re to be corked up for iver, and only dribble your mind out on the sly, like a leaky barrel” (395). Even the narrator concedes that she has “an irritable view of things” (324).

For both sexes, alcohol loosens the tongue and makes the speaker feel invulnerable. However, argues Sandmeier, the “unfettered, unsocialized behavior released by alcohol is fundamentally masculine,” a gender difference that can cause a woman to see such lack of inhibition as a form of gender empowerment (Sandmeier 10). Even in front of the “Young Squire” and Reverend Irvine, the “confidence [Mrs. Poyser] felt in her own powers of exposition was a motive force that overcame all resistance” (126).

Because alcohol unleashes inhibitions, much mythology has arisen regarding alcoholic consumption and female sexual behavior. Ironically, the physical sexual response of most alcoholics, male and female, is at least partly disabled, if anything, and aggressive sexual behavior on the part of the female drinker is more than likely to reflect needs that are not sexual in origin. As Plant points out, “for many women, the perceived association is not with sex per se but with comfort” (Plant 178). And as Edith Gomberg argued in 1974, “there is far more talk about the promiscuity of women with drinking problems than there is evidence. Lack of sexual interest is probably far more common than promiscuity” (Gomberg 177). In Eliot’s novel, whether or not
Mr. Poyser shares the marital bed is debatable, and comfort does seem to be an issue. At one point, Mrs. Poyser promises three-year-old Totty that “she shall go into mother’s bed, and sleep there all night” (191). More than one scholarly study in the latter half of the twentieth century has documented that the female alcoholic is more likely than not to lack interest in sex.\(^6\) “Losing interest in activities… that used to bring pleasure” is yet another item on today’s list of addictive symptoms (Mayo Clinic 2006).

Given the taboos regarding sexuality in patriarchal cultures generally, it does not require a large leap to see that the loss of inhibition in an alcoholic woman, combined with an almost predictable negativity (along, perhaps, with an accompanying undesirability to the opposite sex) would manifest itself in a prurience and a hypervigilance regarding sex in the lives of others, particularly younger women. In effect, of course, such a woman would appear to be merely offering herself as watchdog of prevailing mores. Says the narrator of Mrs. Poyser, “Her tongue was not less keen than her eye, and whenever a damsels came in ear-shot, seemed to take up an unfinished lecture” (118). Indeed, her “keenness and opportunity for observation” allow her to see Hetty’s desire for Arthur Donnithorne, “the moral deficiencies hidden under the ‘dear deceit’ of beauty” (200). And when saddlers are working on the farm, and maid Molly requests leave to “sit down to her spinning till milking time,” Mrs. Poyser responds: “Spinning, indeed! It isn’t spinning as you’d be at… To think of a gell o’ your age wanting to go and sit with half-a-dozen men!” (119). As Ketterman observes, verbal abuse often manifests itself “through the use of vulgar language and crude associations” (Ketterman 13).

Another dominant characteristic in the hidden alcoholic is a talent for creating the red herring, the distraction and/or the rationalization that throws the spotlight away from his or her own liabilities, and for projecting limitations of self onto others. Female alcoholics, in particular, according to Eleanor Agnew and Sharon Robideaux in *My Mama’s Waltz* (1998), “never concede wrongdoing and instead… blame everyone else for their problems” (Agnew and Robideaux 71). Because of the historically greater stigma attached to the female alcoholic, it seems logical that she would become particularly adept at these strategies. Correspondingly, all public behavior on the part of an alcoholic woman for whom community esteem is important is likely to result in an over-zealous attempt to present herself as a paragon of community values. And as it is in the vested interest of the men around such a woman to keep the secret secret (certainly true in rural England in the early nineteenth century), and as she can most easily protect her habit by becoming an ardent representative of all that the culture claims to believe in, it is no wonder that she gets away with her ruses for a time, and that she is allowed to fool herself along with everyone else.

The female addicted to alcohol, in diverting the community gaze from herself, and in being both averse to introspection and terrified of losing control of her household along with her self, is likely to exhibit hypervigilance about
other things as well. “I’m not one o’ those as can see the cat i’ the dairy, an’ wonder what she’s come after,” says Mrs. Poyser of herself; and she is pleased when the dogs bark at visitors, providing “assurance that the farmyard was well guarded, and that no loiterers could enter unobserved” (138). When Martin Poyser suggests that all in the household should attend the “young heir’s” birthday party, his wife objects: “There’s been ill-looking tramps enoo’ about the place this last week, to carry off ivery ham and ivery spoon we got… it’s a mercy they hanna come and pisoned the dogs and murdered us all in our beds” (297). And when the elder Squire is particularly nice to her at the birthday celebration of his son, she says, “I’ll lay my life he’s brewin’ some nasty turn against us. Old Harry doesna wag his tail so for nothin’” (328). And, of course, she is dead right, since the Squire has plans to remove the corn and barley crops from the Poyzers’ care.

Yet another signal characteristic of the alcoholic would appear to be an inconsistency in the expression of emotion, a symptom discussed in Moira Plant’s *Women and Alcohol* as “the very destructive classic ‘Jekyl and Hyde’ character associated with alcohol problems” (Plant 186). And, according to the narrator of *Adam Bede*, Mrs. Poyser is “remarkable for the facility with which she [can] relapse from her official objurgatory tone to one of fondness or of friendly converse” (120). Even the usually tolerant Reverend Irwine refers to Mrs. Poyser’s “irregular justice” (396). With such a mother, even the youngest children are not only seldom fooled, but are adept at evasive strategies. In short, as was the case of the dog who hides under the table in *Scenes of Clerical Life* at the appearance of the claret jug, the child of an alcoholic is not reassured by drunken attentions. Further, children of alcoholics learn from a very early age how to ameliorate uncomfortable situations without appearing to do so. Those who can, stay out of the house. And as it happens, readers never get to know the little Poyser boys, who seem almost entirely absent. Totty, however, is too little to go anywhere without adult supervision; and at one point, when ostensibly being rocked to sleep in her mother’s lap, she cries out “in an explosive manner” in response to her mother’s tirade at Hetty for coming in late, whereupon Mrs. Poyser does an abrupt shift from resident warden to loving mother, pulling Totty to her, “leaning back and rocking the chair.” But Totty cries even more loudly, “don’t yock!” (191). Here, Totty not only truncates the tirade, but immediately thereafter objects to her mother’s characteristically jerky movement, as well as to her characteristically abrupt emotional shift from harpy to nanny.

Another proffered characteristic of female addicts is an array of associated illnesses. Within the last couple of decades, medicine has documented links between alcoholism and coronary heart disease, hypertension, stroke, and breast cancer (Plant 88). Further, there is medical evidence that women absorb alcohol more rapidly and that there are “statistical differences of reduced cumulative exposure to alcohol among females compared to males matched for stage of alcohol-induced liver disease” (Gavaler and Arria 125). At the
time of a reader’s first visit to Hall Farm in June, we find that Mrs. Poyser had spent the entire month of January in bed (408-9), and that “only two winters ago she had been laid up for weeks with a cold” (403). She herself is fond of reminding everyone that she is “wasted pretty nigh to a shadder” (436). “I’ve no breath to spare,” she laments elsewhere, “an’ that catchin’ pain comes on dreadful by times” (201). As Ruby Redinger rightly observes, Mrs. Poyser “dominates through verbal criticism with such force that the reader is surprised when reminded that she is pale and not vigorous in health” (Redinger 40). In short, Mrs. Poyser’s illness is inherently suspect, in that it serves no narrative function and is in marked contrast to the way Mrs. Poyser is perceived by everyone but her husband, who is the only one to express concern: “It’s time thee was in bed,” says Martin to his wife. “Thee’t bring on the pain in the side again” (192). The allusions to Mrs. Poyser’s illness appear to serve no narrative purpose other than that I have suggested.

Perhaps the most biting satiric segment pointing to Mrs. Poyser’s alcoholism occurs in Chapter 32, “Mrs. Poyser Has Her Say Out,” in which the elder Squire comes to tell the Poysers that the prospective tenant of Chase Farm, Mr. Thurle, is dissatisfied with the lack of “plough land” there and requires changes. The Squire suggests that the Poysers take over Chase Farm’s dairy land, and relinquish their crops to Mr. Thurle. For every logical reason the Squire provides, Mrs. Poyser responds with tirade, irrational and scattered, a rant which includes every far-fetched disaster she can call up that would inevitably occur should the crops go to someone else. Readers cannot help but be delighted, not only at the deftness of her barbed homilies, but at her nerve in being thus equipped verbally to clobber her “betters.” What gets buried entirely is the reality: if Mrs. Poyser loses her crops, she also loses her “brewery,” which would require her to frequent the nearest alehouse. And she is persuasive enough in her anger: “as, for all I’m a woman, and there’s folks as thinks a woman’s fool enough to stan’ by an’ look on while the men sign her soul away, I’ve a right to speak” (393).

Among all of the symptoms of addiction and withdrawal put forth by clinics and hospitals, however, the most prominent and predictable is that of denial, and in the case of a female addict such denial would be particularly encouraged. As Sandmeier points out, the “response of those close to the alcoholic woman is usually to deny the problem right along with her,” partly because the problem “might be seen as a reflection on them as well” (Sandmeier 7). If the husband of a female addict does not abandon her, he often becomes skilled at reassuring everyone that there is no problem. At the end of the above scene in *Adam Bede*, when everyone is finally going to bed, Martin Poyser closes the chapter in an aside to his niece: “come, Hetty, get to bed… your aunt’s been worrited [sic] lately” (193).

Denial also predominates among children of addicted parents, as well as among other family members, who “deny that a problem exists by not talking about it or by adjusting family responsibilities so that the alcoholic’s neglect
of routine tasks is not apparent” (Nastasi and DeZolt 27). And it is not surprising that such denial is most pronounced when the addicted parent is the mother. Given the absence of evidence one way or the other, the Eliot biographers who have opted for the more domestically competent view of Christiana Evans are merely adhering to a deeply entrenched custom within the culture. As a specialist on alcoholism has observed, the behavior the female alcoholic is seen as “more scandalous, more contemptible, more degrading” than that of the male.⁸

Often associated with denial is an intense concern with outward appearances – keeping an over-swept house and over-polished children. What Elizabeth Ettore refers to in *Women and Substance Use* as “the politics of appearance,” the “disjunction between the male and female gaze” (Ettore 155), certainly applies here. Mrs. Poyser makes her fastidiousness a public matter by viciously berating all the maids who do not live up to her well-known standards. When Arthur Donnithorne asks to see little Totty, she has “misgivings lest something should have happened to render her person and attire unfit for presentation” (130). And although both Poyzers are people “to whom a good name was as precious as if they had the best blood in the land in their veins” (184), Mrs. Poyser so values her reputation that she is ready to project any perceived lapse onto someone else.⁹ When Arthur and the Reverend Irwine come unexpectedly to visit, Mrs. Poyser accuses Dinah of “bringing… disgrace upo’ your uncle’s family” through her preaching (123). Such projection fulfills part of the female alcoholic’s tendency to create “an elaboration of defenses designed to isolate and protect the individual from the self and the social condemnation which accompanies [a] loss of control” (Kinsey 27).

On the morning of Hetty’s trial, the narrator intervenes: “Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state” (471). And indeed, after Hetty has been convicted of the murder of Arthur’s child and deported to Australia, although references to alcohol, alcoholism, barley, and brewing continue to appear, we see that Mrs. Poyser’s behavior has altered. For the first time in the novel, tea takes the place of ale, and Mrs. Poyser chastises Methodist Dinah Morris for her plans to return to Stoniton: “But I suppose it doesna matter so much about folks’s souls i’ this country, else you’d be for staying with your own aunt, for she’s none so good but what you might help her to be better.” The narrator continues:

There was a certain something in Mrs. Poyser’s voice just then, which she did not wish to be noticed, so she turned round hastily to look at the clock, and said: “See there! It’s tea-time; an’ if Martin’s i’ the rick-yard, he’ll like a cup. Here, Totty, my chicken. Let mother put your bonnet on, and then you go out into the rick-yard and see if father’s there, and tell him he mustn’t go away again again without coming t’ have a cup o’ tea; and tell your brothers to come in too” (519).

Mrs. Poyser is a changed woman, and given the number of references to tea on the subsequent pages, instead of “At the Hall Farm” this chapter could more accurately have been titled “At the Tea Table.” Even though there is
“little outward change… in the pleasant house-place, bright with polished oak and pewter” (518), Mrs. Poyser’s demeanor is becalmed: “The milking of the cows was a sight Mrs. Poyser loved, and at this hour on mild days she was usually standing at the house door, with her knitting in her hands, in quiet contemplation” (517). Here, the reader does not get the earlier sense of clacking needles. Further, Mrs. Poyser is every bit as desperate at the prospect of temperance-preaching Dinah’s departure from her side as Janet Dempster was at the thought of withdrawing from alcohol without the constant attention of her Reverend Tryan. She uses every device to persuade Dinah to stay, even going so far as to suggest Totty will be likely, in Dinah’s absence, to fall in the fire (520). “If you didna mean to stay wi’ me, you’d better never ha’ come. Them as ha’ never had a cushion don’t miss it” (523). And when her husband chides her, she continues to plead, “but there’s reason i’ what I say, else I shouldna say it… An’ me got so used to her! I shall feel as uneasy as a new-sheared sheep when she’s gone from me” (524).

In fact, the whole fictional Hayslope has tamed its drinking. In “The Harvest Supper,” the final chapter but one, we watch with Adam “the last load of barley winding its way towards the yard-gate” (559), then we go in to food and the “drinking ceremony,” which demonstrates a marked contrast to Arthur’s coming-of-age. “To any listener outside the door,” says the narrator, it would have been the reverse of obvious why the “Drink, boys, drink!” should have such an immediate and often-repeated encore; but once entered, he would have seen that all faces were at present sober, and most of them serious: it was the regular and respectable thing for those excellent farm-labourers to do” (564).

In short, that the “lyricism of the evening was in the cellar at present, and was not to be drawn from that retreat just yet” (565) indicates that Mrs. Poyser has put some clamps on the drinking in her own household. “I prefer a country,” wrote George Eliot in 1875,

where I don’t make bad blood by having to see one public house to every six dwellings – which is literally the case in many spots around us. My gall rises at the rich brewers in Parliament and out of it, who plant these poison shops for the sake of their million-making trade, while probably their families are figuring somewhere as refined philanthropists or devout Evangelicals and Ritualists (Haight 1954, 6: 166).

IV
Finally, George Eliot’s Mrs. Poyser possesses what appears to be the major characteristic leading the female to abuse alcohol. Although the easy access mentioned above, along with the silence and sanction that accompany such access, is an enabling factor for all alcoholic women, what researchers see as even more important is a woman’s sense of inadequacy as a woman. And Mrs. Poyser definitely feels she has been miscast: “I know what the men like,” she says, “a poor soft, as ‘ud simper at ‘em like the pictur o’ the sun” (569). She is unquestionably Hayslope’s quickest wit, yet the credit she gets for it
is much different from that accruing to the “half-witted Tom Tholer... a great favourite on the farm,” whose “success in repartee... falls quite at random, but nevertheless smashes an insect now and then” (561). Mrs. Poyser never misses. And, as Agnew and Robideaux document, many alcoholic mothers are “strong, independent women” before they start drinking (Agnew and Robideaux 29). Whereas Dorothea Brooke in Eliot’s Middlemarch would find some worthy outlet for her intelligence, Mrs. Poyser is truly stuck. In studies on alcoholic women in the 1970s, Sharon Wilsnack (1973) found that, in comparison with non-alcoholic women, female alcoholics frequently see themselves as trapped in an inappropriate, gender-prescribed role (Wilsnack 257). And there is no question but that Mrs. Poyser is one resentful housewife when she complains that “as long as ye can stir hand and foot, the men think ye’re hearty” (530).

Cross’s description of Eliot’s mother as “a woman with an unusual amount of natural force; a shrewd, practical person, with a considerable dash of the Mr. Poyser vein in her” is one that subsequent writers on her life have repeatedly quoted. Haight, in his still-definitive biography of Eliot, comments that Christiana Evans was recognized for “that epigrammatic turn of phrase made famous by Mrs. Poyser, whose tongue was ‘like a new-set razor’” (Haight 1985, 3). I think there is good reason to believe that, in Rachel Poyser, George Eliot not only created a closeted female alcoholic whose portrait had originated in Eliot’s own home, but that she set it all up so that the closeting itself remains satirically closeted from her readers. It even seems possible that the author herself is likely to have had a hand in penning that brief associative description Cross provides of her mother, with its metonymic “dash” and its “vein.” When in 1860 John Blackwood, Eliot’s publisher, wrote his successful author a letter suggesting that his firm might publish a combined edition of Scenes of Clerical Life and Adam Bede, Eliot was pleased to put the two together and agreed readily: “There are ideas presented in these stories about which I care a good deal,” she wrote back, “and am not sure that I can ever embody again” (Haight 1954, 2: 240).

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
sibley@hawaii.edu

ENDNOTES
1. See, as an example, Margaret Smith’s Introduction to the 1992 edition of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.
2. “Cross, after using [Eliot’s journal] for the Life, cut out and destroyed the first forty-six pages, the intimate record of her life from 1849 to 1854” (Haight 1985, 71).
3. Athenaeum #3031 (November 28, 1885), 702. See Redinger (18) and Ashton (382).
4. Blanche Colton Williams, in her George Eliot (1936), likewise focuses on Eliot’s father and refers to his diary: “Family and personal affairs are set down in detail,” she claims, then goes on to quote: “Took Mrs. Evans to Coventry this afternoon” and “Mrs. Evans in the gig to Mr. Everard’s in the evening” (9). But these references seem merely to document that Christiana had once lived. All else is extrapolated from Cross’s earlier allusion to “Mrs. Poyser”: “Christiana
lives, it is understood, in Mrs. Poyser, of ‘Adam Bede’; and though caution would not ascribe to
the real woman too much of the one imagined, family tradition acknowledges the identity. A good
helpmeet was Christiana, whose tables and pewter dishes shone from elbow-polish – her servants’
elbows more than her own” (Williams 11). Other Williams conclusions admit to overt specula-
tions, such as, “One hears Christiana’s voice: ‘Now Mr. Evans. . .’” and “Kindly, epigrammatic,
she was a woman in whose ill health perhaps lay the source of her sharp philosophy. ‘It’s but
little good you’ll do a-watering the last year’s crop’ illustrates the sardonic tang with which Mary
Anne flavored Mrs. Poyser’s gnomic speeches” (11). Williams decides, purely on the basis of
Cross’s evasions and Eliot’s subsequent characterization of Mrs. Poyser that, “to her mother and
father the girl was devoted” (11). “Like Robert,” says another biographer, “[Christiana] wanted
the best for [all her children], and if, in the process of their upbringing, she resorted frequently to
reproof and chastisement, this was done only as her ‘plain duty.’ Certainly, all five children loved her
dearly” (Sprague 7). Rosemarie Bodenheimer (1994) avoids the subject entirely. Rosemary
Ashton (1996) observes only that “[Mrs. Evans] is scarcely mentioned in George Eliot’s surviv-
ing letters and journals, and when she does make an appearance there, we learn nothing of what
she was like” (17).

5. The source for my list of symptoms of alcoholism and withdrawal is the Mayo Clinic web-
site. These “signs and symptoms” are so widely circulated that they may be considered general
knowledge; the lists provided by other clinics, hospitals and help groups contain very much the
same information. It seems reasonable to believe the “red flags” of addiction and withdrawal in
nineteenth-century England do not differ markedly from our own.

sey, “sexual relations of female alcoholics are characterized by inhibition, frigidity, [and] lack of
interest” (181).

7. See, in particular, Ackerman (1989), Chapter 4.

8. Sandmaier (1992) provides a cogent discussion of society’s response to women’s alcohol-
ism in ancient Greece, Britain, and the United States.

9. The issue of Mrs. Poyser’s “reputation” is an interesting one. Ben Cranage, an alcoholic
whom Adam chides in the first chapter of the novel, makes an intriguing (and unelucidated)
comment: “Poyser’s wife may turn her nose up an’ forget bygones” (65). Ben’s comment exists
not only to imply that he and Mrs. Poyser were once “drinking buddies,” but to invite the reader
to speculate that Martin and Rachel Poyser have through their barley and corn and their “brew-
house” grown prosperous at least partly through the alcoholic consumption of their neighbors,
and maybe even through exports to the Birmingham factories.

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