

‘High-brow’ George Eliot and ‘Popular’ Fanny Lewald: ‘Separateness and Communication’, the Anxiety of Influence, or Differences without Contact?
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When George Eliot and George Henry Lewes travelled to Berlin in July 1854 and met the writer couple Fanny Lewald and Adolf Stahr, Marian’s interest pertained not so much to aesthetics but to the novelists’ personal relationship: the Stahr-Lewald couple lived, like Eliot and Lewes, in a quasi-marriage which would only be legitimised after nine years and Adolf’s divorce. Lewes and Eliot would return to Berlin in 1870, again to also visit the Lewald-Stahr couple, but the relationship would never be a close one between Fanny and Marian, despite knowledge of each other’s works. There really should have been more scrutiny of each other’s works, though. Had the two women done so, they would have found many commonalities, beginning with the attack on the sentimentalism of other female writers, via the view that literature had a didactic purpose and should be realist, to a decidedly pro- and proto-feminist stance. And if we look deeper – which neither Eliot nor Lewald did – both also had a particular interest in the philosophies of Feuerbach and Spinoza.

There are a number of differences though, too. We have always struggled to find a label for Eliot’s readership: Queenie Leavis says in *Fiction and the Reading Public* that Eliot was the last Victorian author to be read by a homogenous readership, before the separation into a ‘high’ and a ‘popular’ camp. Lewald was clearly seen as a popular writer in Germany. And yet they write about the same topics in the same modality! Clearly, we need to dig deeper here, for the purposes of understanding ‘the (Victorian) popular’ and women’s place – albeit across the Channel – in it.

This paper is the first chapter of a larger book project that compares and contrasts German and British nineteenth-century realism in theory and in selected novels. This paper on Eliot and Lewald is only a very first tentative step to start looking at labels and begin an enquiry into whether the novel in Germany and in Britain developed parallel to each other, in contradistinction and through an anxiety of influence or, in Daniel Deronda’s words, in ‘separateness and communication’.

Biography

Julia Kuehn is Associate Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong where she teaches courses on nineteenth-century literature and culture. She has published widely on women’s, popular and Empire fiction, as well as on travel writing. Julia is currently working on a comparative study of German and British nineteenth-century realist fiction.