George Eliot’s fictions, like her life, at once reflect, expose and undermine the hierarchical ideologies of patriarchy. Subversion was not necessarily a fully conscious strategy on Eliot’s part, however. As Mary Poovey has noted, the female writer’s responses to the restrictions that bind her can create in her work, even without her knowledge, contradictions that ‘may emerge in the discrepancy between [her] explicit aesthetic program and the emotional affect the text generates’.¹ In Eliot’s fiction, such incongruities appear most frequently in the self-subverting structure of her plots; in the exaggeratedly male or the ambivalently androgynous voices that tell her stories; and in the overdetermined position created for the reader by those plots and voices – a position that can lead the reader to supplement and to resist the text’s apparent or explicit meaning. Often, Eliot’s fictions elicit a double or a multiple reading, one which emerges from a radical disjunction between, on the one hand, the aims achieved by the conventional plot and voice and, on the other hand, the desire for a different story and treatment fostered by the narrative’s detailed attention to the consequences of sexual difference in patriarchal culture: a ‘gender plot’ works against the grain of the conventional narrative of romantic love or personal development, exposing its privileging of the masculine.

This doubleness in Eliot’s fiction makes her treatment of endings especially interesting and problematic. In even the
most traditional of her narrative structures, the gender plot interferes most violently with the teleological thrust of the narrative just at the point of conventional closure – at precisely the moment when the reader has been led to expect a neat resolution of the tensions within the text. This collision of values in Eliot’s endings often results from her use of the Conclusion, Epilogue, or Finale: the very devices that suggest an overdetermination of closure work to undo the resolution they pretend to achieve. Such Penelope-like unravelling of the plot even as it reaches closure is sometimes also the result of the juxtaposition of interlocking plots in the narrative conclusion: the resolution of one or more subplots can undermine the values that seem to be bringing the main plot to its triumphant termination. Eliot’s texts thus reflect what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has described as a basic characteristic of closure: ‘Any resolution can have traces of the conflicting materials that have been processed within it. It is where subtexts and repressed discourses can throw up one last flare of meaning’. Conflict of meaning, interestingly enough, was something that Eliot once half-comically associated with feminine writing. Toying with the stereotype of woman as unstable and fickle, she wrote to John Chapman in 1854, ‘Your letter made me glad and sorry. It is the immemorial fashion of lady letter-writers to be glad and sorry in the same sentence, and after all, this feminine style is the truest representation of life’ (GEL 8: 115).

Scenes of Clerical Life, most of which was written before even John Blackwood knew its author was a woman, appears on the surface to have none of the doubleness of ‘feminine style’. Narrated by an upper-class man who reminisces about his past as a ‘genteel’ youth wearing tails and coming home ‘for the midsummer holidays’ from a ‘distant’ school (‘Janet’s Repentance’ 5), the stories explicitly address upper-class masculine readers and single out for scorn the ‘feminine’ reader – satirically called ‘Mrs Farthin-