Chapter 3

Competing Visions: Nightingale, Eliot, and Victorian Health Reform

By the mid 1860s, Nightingale had acquired a degree of moral authority in the general public as a result primarily of her widely documented work in the Crimea. But she had also earned the respect of many in government and intellectual circles, through her largely behind-the-scenes work on issues related to the sick, the poor, and women—including workhouse reform, hospital design, retraining women for careers in nursing, and army and hospital sanitary reform. Some of the leading female reformers and novelists of her day, including Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Blackwell,1 Elizabeth Gaskell, and philanthropist Angela Burdett-Coutts,2 had offered their support to Nightingale’s reform efforts by helping to find resources for soldiers, to retrain manufacturing women to be nurses, and (in Martineau’s case), using Nightingale’s sanitary statistics and documents about training the military in sanitary principles to write editorials favorable to Nightingale’s views in popular periodicals, such as the Daily News.3

There were three types of reforms; however, that Nightingale was (perhaps surprisingly) reluctant to get behind publicly despite the urgings of some of her prominent female (and male) reformer friends. She resisted endorsing the three
following initiatives: advocating for women’s suffrage, opening medical education to women; and supporting medical reforms of particular kinds that, she felt, drew intellectual and financial resources away from sanitary studies. One might have imagined—given her well-documented comments in her correspondence, “Cassandra,” and elsewhere about the stifling lives that most women of her day led—that Nightingale would have agitated enthusiastically for votes for women and for women’s right to enter into the field of medicine. Likewise, her interest in assembling “the facts” about disease in order to save lives through sanitary studies would suggest that she would have supported research of any scientific kind into the nature of disease.

None of these assumptions would be correct. The previous chapters of *Victorian Medicine and Social Reform: Florence Nightingale among the Novelists* have described Nightingale’s willingness—despite her feeling that fiction distorted the truth through sensationalism and sentimentalizing—to draw from the rhetorical and narrative strategies of novelists in order more effectively to influence public opinion in favor of her reform ideas. This chapter considers the rather different feelings provoked in Nightingale by a novelist whose prolific intellect and genius for realist description had earned the kind of respect among Victorian intellectuals reserved for only a handful of Victorian writers, including Nightingale herself. George Eliot’s method of representing her fictional worlds according to her dazzlingly wide-ranging reading in the works of her scientific, medical, and philosophical contemporaries was particularly evident in *Middlemarch*. It created, for Nightingale, not only what Catherine Judd has described as “a competition for the role of social prophet” between the two women; it also created withering challenges to many of the scientific and philosophical principles on which Nightingale’s own authority on public health issues had been based.

To be sure, Nightingale never explicitly acknowledged the threat that Eliot’s status as social and scientific sage posed to her own. She based her objections to *Middlemarch* both in public and private writings primarily on what she saw as