FEMALE LIVES FIT INTO PROCRUSTEAN BEDS IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*. PALTRY FEMALE INSTRUCTION AND PAROCHIAL LITTLENESS

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Abstract Two seemingly unrelated 19th-century concerns – marriage and vocation – run very palpably through George Eliot's (1871-72) novel, *Middlemarch*. Eliot's female characters – Dorothea Brooke, Rosamond Vincy, and Mary Garth – stand as examples of the human frailties registered in an English provincial community on the verge of change, when the agitation for the first Reform Bill reaches its peak in England. Since history has always been much more than a dormant backdrop to literature and literary criticism, the present study intends to show that the only way of escaping parochial littleness in Eliot's fictional town is through female reading and (self-) instruction. Women's education – be it formal or non-formal – had acquired more significance towards the end of the 19th century through the cultural revolution that female characters in Victorian fiction started for their readers.
Keywords Victorian Britain, female education, male scholarship, provinciality, marriage, vocation.

1. Introduction

George Eliot's (1871-72) novel, *Middlemarch*, is the most difficult to pin down into one literary category (romance? social comedy? historical novel? psychological novel? a novel that works within the *Bildung* tradition?) of her writings, casting its female characters' development – especially that of Dorothea Brooke – as young gentlewomen striving for a more significant existence in terms of their maturation as critical readers of texts, individuals and events, both public and private. Most novels belong to several categories and *Middlemarch* is, in this regard, no exception. Versatile *Middlemarch* may be (such literary categories are, after all, abstractions bringing out different levels of meaning of the narrative), yet in its concern with female education and Victorian marital compatibility, it self-consciously enters into issues of

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interpretation and misinterpretation, into the lively political debates of the period and the multiple valences of British class structure. The novel asks fundamental questions about women's role and fate in pre-Victorian English society, just before the first Reform Bill, between the years of 1829 and 1832; about sign making and sign reading in the Middlemarch world; about marital catalysts and post-marital blues; and, just as importantly, about the gulf between (wasted) potential and achievement. Such is the common cant.

One ought to pause here and ask: Who exactly are Dorothea Brooke, Rosamond Vincy, and Mary Garth in the fictional realm of *Middlemarch*? Are their characters used by George Eliot to demonstrate the harm of wasting female talent,[1] women's lack of education and independence and, as a result, their superficiality and passivity? Or is their fictioneering used to generate a study of interpretation and its inherent difficulties in the novel? Are their lessons in marital domesticity and their scant opportunities at acquiring a male-like education legitimate causes for alarm or instruments of lucidity? Or does it cut both ways? In a society not made to reinforce noble aspirations in a woman, where the womenfolk are critics of dress fabrics and house interiors and the menfolk are analysts of their neighbors' lands and profits, where does a woman with "an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life"[2] and "a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent"[3] stand? Can women attain fame and success in matters of education, scholarship or social reform? Do women's lives need to be public in order to be great? Scanning for such ambivalent textual knowledge will revive the way in which *Middlemarch*, a gloriously complex and intricately planned novel, slips in and out of being a social experiment concerned with the pervasive misinterpretation of the characters by collective community judgement.

Female characters of both low and high birth are associated with domestic spaces into which standard education and grand historical events have yet to penetrate. Given that Eliot

[1] Booth, Alison, in "*Middlemarch*, *Bleak House*, and Gender." *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Middlemarch*, ed. Kathleen Blake (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1990), 129-137, takes up the controversial question of whether male and female talent alike is to be "channeled" (136) in Eliot's fictional provincial town, an equivocal replica of the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres (the idea – running throughout the 19th century – that women are socially and culturally inferior to men and must, thus, be bound to the patriarchal home, whereas their counterparts, roaming the earth freely, ought to express themselves in social, cultural, and ideological matters, and lead women away from perdition through emancipation). Eliot ultimately punishes, in the *Finale*, the male creator (characters such as Tertius Lydgate or Edward Casaubon) who want "a plaything for a wife" (137) to face mediocrity – men in the novel never achieve greatness or full-fledged success. The female character is still shown as a sacrificial creature in her second-rate role as a wife and a mother, although she does gain the attributes of a survivor rather than a martyr (Victorian literature is full to the brim with female characters like Jane Eyre or Ellen Dean, who achieve independence from male financial support via the route of inheritance or self-culture and personal effort). It is the only framework Victorian fiction as a genus can grant women – dependent, even well into the 20th century, on men – on their property, consent, will, and power.

[2] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 23.

[3] Ibid., 24.

was greatly influenced by the Romantic movement as a whole and by her predecessors – Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott – it is not difficult to observe how the author cleverly develops Austen's method of using critically examined social comedy and ironic humor to present serious historical predicaments or Scott's preference for embedding allusions in his works by means of mottos that frame the novel's chapters or by means of the character's learned references and favorite authors and books. This is what makes Middlemarch "a novel *about* epigraphy, about identifying and deciphering quotation and allusion."[4] Scott's Abel Sampson in *Guy Mannering* (1815), to a small extent, and Jonathan Oldbuck in *The Antiquary* (1816), to a greater extent, are similar to Edward Casaubon. Both Oldbuck and Casaubon, for instance, outline their speeches' structure with learned allusions, spend their days attended to by their womenfolk and coax themselves into the idea that they are men of genius brought into the world to surface, through their writings, the relics of their textual and cultural past. Their scholarship, however, only remains located in the imagination – their own imagination or other characters' imagination.

By careful name-dropping of books, the reader learns that although Dorothea Brooke is deprived of the higher education opportunities allowed to Edward Casaubon, Tertius Lydgate or Sir James Chettam, she can still develop a refined sensibility through exposure to fine books chosen from the world's great literature. Thus, the reader is expected to pick up various textual allusions providing new avenues for critical insight into the relation established between the literary masterpieces and the psychology of *Middlemarch*. Dorothea has Jeremy Taylor, John Locke, Hooker (a shorthand notation for Richard Hooker, a famous 16th-century theologian), John Milton and Blaise Pascal as companions, which both adds a sophisticated touch to the female character's reading habits and draws the reader's attention towards the tension between the real and the imaginary in the nineteenth century and in Victorian fiction at large. Though definitely not a devotee of the Victorian working-class sub-culture centered on penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers, Dorothea, like most of her historically-attested contemporaries, yearns for an entrance into a highly sought-after branch of the education system of her day – classical philology – and shows deep respect and veneration for the past. Through subtle allusions to *Paradise Lost*, Eliot is shown "to evaluate her characters' illusions against a Miltonic standard of truth."[5] Though marriage is largely refracted in *Middlemarch* through the lens of a provincial England in a doubting age, it nevertheless rehearses the relationship of the original biblical couple, Adam and Eve. The highly alert reader knows,

[4] Adam Roberts, *Middlemarch. Epigraphs and Mirrors* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 4.

[5] Anna K. Nardo, *George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 111. Nardo details in her 2003 book how Eliot measures her heroines' experience against the real-life vicissitudes of John Milton's daughters, similarly recruited as readers for a visually impaired poet and intellectual. Nardo also demonstrates that Eliot reframes Dorothea Brooke's provincial married life next to a Miltonic husband in terms of textual allusions to Milton's great epic, *Paradise Lost* (1667), used in *Middlemarch* in a less direct way.

however, that Dorothea challenges her fallen forebear's submissiveness to male authority through her intentions to know and do *more*:

> My Author and Disposer, what thou bidd'st
> Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains,
> God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more
> Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.[6]

In her dialogue with Milton's art and life, Eliot uses *Paradise Lost* to reimagine a heroic life for her female characters in an age that allows no epic life to unfold and carry with it scholarly or scientific success. Nardo, however, takes the view that female submission in both *Middlemarch* and its intertext, *Paradise Lost*, is not or should not be the equivalent of self-renunciation, as it mirrors, instead, "a failure of imagination and courage."[7] As Dorothea comes to expand her knowledge through a troubling purgatory process (*Middlemarch* is, after all, an English *Bildung*) that determines her descent from her point of vantage "beyond the gates of Eden" at Tipton Grange and Lowick Manor (as a naïve young woman of privilege, free from material constraints, orphaned, misguided by classical and religious readings and misunderstood by her immediate circle) to "the long valley of her life which looked so flat and empty of waymarks."[8] Eliot still manages to celebrate her female characters as Miltonic heroes fighting – through their domestic expertise and eventual clarity of vision in a material world with an absent God – for "the growing good of the world."[9] Thus, the Dorothea that helplessly gazes from her blue-green boudoir upon the lives of her middle- and working-class neighbors and marries a *faux* Milton is not the same Dorothea that is described in the novel's Finale, the one who heroically softens hearts and determines Eliot's Satan-like figure, Rosamond, to confess the truth and clear Will Ladislaw's name in the process. As a consequence, Lydgate is pulled back from the verge of perdition temporarily, but cannot escape being thrust back into his wife's sensation plots. While the Dorothea of the Prelude seeks a solid basis for knowledge and world-historical action in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, the Dorothea of the Finale, completing rather than duplicating the story of Saint Theresa, converts other characters to a new life (Rosamond, Lydgate, Will) and lays the foundation for a new type of epic ideal uprooted from Christian dogma: the secular heroism of modern agnosticism (which also turns out to be problematic or even tragic, as the later fiction of the nineteenth century shows through female characters such as Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Isabel Archer).

[6] John Milton, *The Complete Poetical Works of John Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 290.
[7] Anna K. Nardo, *George Eliot's Dialogue with John Milton* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 122.
[8] Ibid., 129.
[9] Ibid., 129.

The first-time reader of the novel is promised, via the narrative's full title, *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*, a subject matter and claims to a specific tone and an attitude towards rural people and institutions. Plain sense may take this to mean that what this story of almost eight hundred pages is about to focus on is the town of Middlemarch, a large social scene with an allegorical ring to it (other such onomastic devices will give birth to names like Farebrother, Garth, Bulstrode and Vincy). The subtitle, then, claims to examine a whole segment of society, not in a mere string of annotations, but in a laborious *study* like that undertaken by Edward Casaubon (however, only Eliot's study achieves closure!), a term carrying the implication of intellect, investigation, thought-through hypotheses and findings. The operative term *provincial*, too, launches the reader into a perspective that evidently requires some critical detachment and, consequently, comes from the metropolis, from the capital city. The title of the novel promises a rural social structure, a series of prominent stories, a variety of characters, characters with a specific role within their society and social links that reveal what is provincial about Middlemarch, an understanding of the narrowness of human limitation and social institutions, a cosmopolitan sympathy, a reality materialized in different representations or ways of seeing the world and an intellectual tone.

The Prelude to *Middlemarch* announces, as the initial pages of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* do, that a woman's lot is once again at issue. Dorothea Brooke is cast in the role of a modern Saint Theresa of Ávila (1515-82), a Roman Catholic Spanish mystic and Carmelite advocate "who found her epos in the reform of a religious order" and "demanded an epic life."[10] Is our later-born Saint Theresa, the main female figure of most of Book 1, a "cygnet (…) reared uneasily among the ducklings"[11] in the nineteenth-century British pond meant to challenge "our established formulae about women" or a "doll-Madonna in her shrine (…), [an] useless absorbent of precious things"[12] destined to sink into oblivion as a "foundress of nothing"?[13] The answer to such a question remains unattended at this point in the narrative. The Prelude ends, however, in a prophetic tone, with the assertion that the Theresas of Dorothea's day, notwithstanding their self-renunciation, are "helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul."[14] George Eliot has already shown, in her previous novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) how a young woman's life can be cut short by both familial, social and moral forces and by a flood – both, at their heart, natural disasters on men's aspirations. Dorothea Brooke, however, still breathes the air of Middlemarch at the end of the novel, though her idealistic pretensions are debunked and her reality is made more solid.

[10] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 5.
[11] Ibid., 6.
[12] George Eliot, *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 205.
[13] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 6.
[14] Ibid., 5.

2. The Dorothea Brooke/Edward Casaubon storyline

The first chapter of *Middlemarch* divulges many kinds of information about Dorothea – her family's history; her upbringing; the way provincial gentry of her time live; what her nearest and dearest think of her; her attitude towards religion and wedlock; her relations with her sister Celia; her intricate inner life, especially illustrated by her reaction against "the solicitudes of feminine fashion."[15] It is in this vein that George Eliot broaches some of the deepest issues concerning Dorothea Brooke, oftentimes adopting contrasting attitudes towards the heroine "enamoured of intensity and greatness"[16] – indulgent, understanding and sympathetic, but also pitying, amused, detached and critical – which become available to the reader through four types of characterization tactics: 1) authorial commentary (thanks to which we are informed that she "retained very child-like ideas about marriage"[17]); 2) other characters' opinions (Celia's, prospective husbands' ideas about the ideal wife, the *grand dame* Mrs Cadwallader, the Rector's wife (a preserver of the old social order in pre-Victorian Britain), always among the first to set Middlemarch gossip in motion, and her propensity towards back-fence talk, etc.); 3) sarcastic recounting of Dorothea's worldview ("the really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it"[18]); 4) the dramatic method showing Dorothea up and running in Eliot's narrative, as in the tête-à-tête with her sister Celia concerning their late mother's jewels, parts of which deserve quoting below, underlining as they do her attitude towards a topic of great interest amongst women – female adornments:

> "Well, dear, *we should never wear them*, you know." Dorothea spoke in a full cordial tone, half caressing, half explanatory. (…)
>
> Celia colored, and looked very grave. "I think, dear, we are wanting in respect to mamma's memory, to put them by and take no notice of them. And," she added, after hesitating a little, with a rising sob of mortification, "necklaces are quite usual now; and Madame Poincon, who was stricter in some things even than you are, used to wear ornaments. And Christians generally—*surely there are women in heaven now who wore jewels*." Celia was conscious of some mental strength when she really applied herself to argument. (…)
>
> "How very beautiful these gems are!" said Dorothea, *under a new current of feeling*, as sudden as the gleam. "It is strange how deeply colors seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the

[15] Ibid., 6.
[16] Ibid., 5.
[17] Ibid., 8.
[18] Ibid., 8.

> Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them." (…)
>
> "They are lovely," said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely turned finger and wrist, and holding them towards the window on a level with her eyes. All the while *her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colors by merging them in her mystic religious joy*. (…)
>
> "Yes! I will keep these—this ring and bracelet," said Dorothea. Then, letting her hand fall on the table, she said in another tone —"Yet what miserable men find such things, and work at them, and sell them!" She paused again, and Celia thought that her sister was going to renounce the ornaments, as in consistency she ought to do. (…) Dorothea glanced quickly at her sister. Across all her imaginative adornment of those whom she loved, there darted now and then *a keen discernment, which was not without a scorching quality*. If Miss Brooke ever attained perfect meekness, it would not be for lack of inward fire."[19]

Here the reader can observe Dorothea's serious religious attitude towards life combined with the historical traits inherited from her Puritan ancestors. The first chapter, with its description of Miss Brooke's plain dressing, is useful in illustrating the habits of her class (the in-crowd – landowners with deep pockets) for whom a large clothing budget is ostentatious and vulgar, the specifics of her whereabouts (rural, provincial) and the historical period in which Dorothea is brought up (the 1820s, right before the emergence of the railway in rural England). The external reader promptly sees her "thrown into relief"[20] not just by her poor dress, but within the context of provincial pre-Victorian England. The interconnectedness of different approaches to Dorothea (historical, social, religious, psychological) makes it difficult to reach a decision concerning the difference between what might be called 'social influence' and 'individual traits'. Where one ends and the other begins is difficult to assess when it comes to the character of Dorothea, since her heritage is clearly constructed as a minuscule part of English history, while personal characteristics and social background contribute together, to a certain degree, to her preference for simple apparel.

The peculiarities of Miss Brooke's plain dressing are considered not for any worth they may have in themselves (if so, why the lack of details?) but as signs that hint at her temperament. Or again, if the reader takes Dorothea's religious fervor into account, he or she must link it with the family circumstances which shaped the person she is at only nineteen – her orphaned state since she was twelve, her scant instruction in "plans at once narrow and promiscuous,"[21] the Swiss Protestant sway over her religious feelings, Mr. Brooke's decision to

[19] Ibid., 9-11, italics mine.
[20] Ibid., 5.
[21] Ibid., 6.

remain spouseless have all combined to render an unconventional heroine with an unusual amount of independence for a young lady of her class, a gentlewoman "with such a nature, struggling in the bonds of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither."[22] Formal education, paltry as it is in the 1820s, ensures that Dorothea enters adulthood unschooled in the ways of the world. It is still a commodity in high-income families such as Dorothea's. Unfortunately, however, literacy and illiteracy, by 1850 at the least, tend to be inevitably interlinked. Reading and writing were not considered instruments for self-development, but thought of as agents that effect salvation via an unequivocal understanding of God's Word, which explains much of Dorothea's view of books not as things good in themselves but as paraphernalia for self-instruction "out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as to not injure one's neighbours, or – what comes to the same thing – so as to do them the most good."[23]

The book commences with the general expectation among Dorothea's small circle of friends and relatives that she will wed Sir James Chettam, the eligible young baronet interested in "this handsome girl, whose cleverness he delighted"[24], whose reading interests include Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829) and his *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry* (1813) and whose ideas about perfect ladies are inevitably linked with horsemanship. Whenever the "blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type"[25] betook himself to Dorothea, he was "charmingly docile"[26] and "exaggerated the necessity of making himself agreeable"[27] to her either by sending over a chestnut horse trained for a lady or a toy-like Maltese puppy meant to entertain her. Of course, Dorothea is not entertained, even if well-bred ladies like her ought to be fond of Maltese dogs or riding horses as a prerequisite for marriage. Instead, she is fascinated by Reverend Edward Casaubon, "a dried bookworm towards fifty, (…) a clergyman of some distinction"[28] associated by Dorothea with Locke and even with his own pamphlet on Biblical cosmology.

If Sir James Chettam is ready to set on foot her desired improvements for the cottages of Mr Brooke's tenants and excited to see the plans she designed for the cottages after closely reading "Loudon's book,"[29] which most certainly is an allusion to John Claudius Loudon, a landscape gardener and prominent writer interested in such subjects, Mr Causaubon does not in the least share Dorothea's "ideal of life in village charities."[30] Dorothea's interest in philanthropy strikes the ideal reader as odd given the specific timeline of the novel (1829-1832). Her futile efforts to improve the squalid back-to-back life of Mr. Brooke's tenants draws

[22] Ibid., 24.
[23] Ibid., 693.
[24] Ibid., 18.
[25] Ibid., 13.
[26] Ibid., 28.
[27] Ibid., 25.
[28] Ibid., 19.
[29] Ibid., 27.
[30] Ibid., 24.

the reader's attention to the idea that parliamentary reform (such as the one that had come, in 1832, with the Great Reform Bill) has done nothing to improve the starved life of working-class voters and only opened the door a crack for further reform (which was to be recorded again by Eliot in her 1866 novel, *Felix Holt*, where education is shown to be the only hope of improvement for a newly enfranchised electorate of working people). Philanthropy is certainly one historical thread to take hold of when considering the changes that occurred in Britain between the pre-Victorian period and the later part of the nineteenth-century. Lady philanthropists with a penchant for putting their financial and emotional resources into wider social purposes were a prevalent figure characteristic of the 1850s, when high-minded 'do-goodism' took a new impetus, rather than the 1820s or the 1830s in Britain, which were defined by their missionaries and their anti-slave-trade campaigns.

With the downfall of Chartism and the temporary failure of socialism in Britain, along with the further brutal Revolutions of 1848 on the Continent, the upper-middle classes made an effort to bury the hatchet with the working-class. This is how Christian Socialism came about and how the Working Men's College was set up in 1854 in London. Such concerted efforts towards class-reconciliation were eagerly supported by many intellectuals such as Carlyle, Ruskin (Will Ladislaw is an apt Ruskinian figure in *Middlemarch*) and Matthew Arnold. By endowing Dorothea Brooke with such unwearied and high-minded humanitarian concerns, Eliot shares the feelings of many British intellectuals who felt a peculiar responsibility for English society and held a strong influence on the leisured classes, much like Dickens did through his narratives. Miss Brooke's interest in the public world of organized charities, the narrator informs us, stands out. It is substantiated by the perusal of sermonizing novels and devotional works such as *Female Scripture Characters; Exemplifying Female Virtues* (1811), written by Frances Elizabeth King (1757-1821), who helped her brother develop the London-based *Society for Bettering the Condition of and Improving the Comforts of the Poor* and dedicated her life to the founding of schools and libraries in her husband's parishes. Dorothea herself, we are told, set going in the village an infant school and took great delight in designing building plans for the less privileged. The extent to which Eliot based her Dorothean figure upon her contemporaries - Frances Elizabeth King or Hannah More – is difficult to approximate. The parallels between Dorothea and historically-attested figures with similar ardent motivations to do good in the world, however, are hard to ignore.

The marriage Dorothea is about to make is clearly one that counts when the social and the intellectual British scene that comprises her begins to diversify. Had she had her parents with her, Dorothea's views on marriage would have been kept in check and might have been more lucid. She felt positive that

> "(…) she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he did in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or many of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure; but an amiable handsome baronet, who said "Exactly" to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty – how could he affect

> her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it."[31]

A possible explanation of how Dorothea came to be interested in Casaubon, a middle-aged scholar with intellectual leanings, comes one century later in a study about women's need for arresting occupations. This study insists on the differences between men and women, attributing to the latter category a greater intensity of emotions and a certain impressionability which are relevant here to the habit of reading as a catalyst for marriage. The American psychologist G. Stanley Hall, whose work, *Adolescence* (1904), greatly influenced educational protocols in England and in the United States at the outset of the twentieth century, holds that

> "(…) woman at her best never outgrows adolescence as man does, but lingers in, magnifies and glorifies this culminating stage of life with its all-sided interests, its convertibility of emotions, its enthusiasm, and zest for all that is good, beautiful, true, and heroic. This constitutes her freshness and charm, even in age, and makes her by nature more humanistic than man, more sympathetic and appreciative."[32]

Hall suggests that women's desire for love is transformed into a desire for knowledge unless their interests are directed towards wifehood and motherhood. Attempting to assert her own individuality, the woman becomes engrossed in outer achievements – "art, science, literature and reforms."[33] She begins to pine for that which she cannot possess and pursues incentives for feelings that have never been voiced straightforwardly. This is how Dorothea is goaded into the sorrow of an ill-advised marriage. She had never been taught how to bring "painfully inexplicable" notions into "any sort of relevance with her life."[34] Thus, the future home of her wifehood at Lowick is her external locus-of-hope. What is painfully inexplicable to Dorothea stares right into "the midst of her Puritanic conceptions," that is, right into her internal agency in generating plans to substantialize her aspirations. Dorothea anxiously looks forward to access through marriage to "[t]hose provinces of masculine knowledge from which all truth could be seen more clearly."[35] The external reader can notice a not-at-all comfortable irony, nearer to condolement, in the narrator's comment on Dorothea's desire to have a learned husband – "she wished, poor child, to be wise herself."[36] Her constant fill-in-the-gaps efforts show how the symbolism of reading in Dorothea's fictional life serves to define the relative orthodoxy of her attitudes towards marriage. She fills up all blanks in Casaubon's alleged

[31] Ibid., 8.
[32] Stanley G. Hall, *Adolescence. Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, Vol. II (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 624.
[33] Ibid., 629.
[34] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 65.
[35] Ibid., 56.
[36] Ibid., 56.

erudition "with unmanifested perfections, interpreting him as she interpreted the works of Providence, and accounting for seeming discords by her own deafness to higher harmonies."[37]

There is very little unbiased evidence as to whether Casaubon is a suitable match for Dorothea in chapters 2, 3 and 4. It is commonly known that Casaubon is a middle-aged scholar and clergyman, a well-to-do member of his society. He leads a comfortable life but is rather confined to a provincial setting. Dorothea's own "scholarphilia"[38] is what draws her to his supposed learning. Dialogue exchanges between them are mentioned but not directly given and it is only in chapter 5 that the reader has anything valuable to carry on his or her interest in the potential couple – Casaubon's letter proposing marriage and Dorothea's subsequent heart-to-heart chats with her affianced husband. Chapters 6 and 8 offer a glimpse of Mrs. Cadwallader's and Sir James's attitudes towards marriage. Casaubon is only briefly described in chapter 7, then more fully in chapter 9, when Dorothea visits Lowick and meets Will Ladislaw in passing. The reader is not granted a lengthy analysis of Casaubon until the eve of his marriage, in chapter 10. When, five chapters earlier, Casaubon was officially announced as a lover by sending Miss Brooke a "love" letter, his pretentious pedantry penetrates the idiom of the novel:

> "For in the first hour of meeting you, I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need (connected, I may say, with such activity of the affections as even the preoccupations of a work too special to be abdicated could not uninterruptedly dissimulate); and each succeeding opportunity for observation has given the impression an added depth by convincing me more emphatically of that fitness which I had preconceived, and thus evoking more decisively those affections to which I have but now referred. (…) But I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated. It was, I confess, beyond my hope to meet with this rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labors and to cast a charm over vacant hours; (…). To be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare, I should regard as the highest of providential gifts. In return I can at least offer you an affection hitherto unwasted, and the faithful consecration of a life which, however short in the sequel, has no backward pages whereon, if you choose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you either bitterness or shame. I await the expression of your sentiments with an anxiety which it would be the part of wisdom (were it possible) to divert by a more arduous labor than usual."[39]

[37] Ibid., 65.
[38] Adam Roberts, *Middlemarch. Epigraphs and Mirrors* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 10.
[39] Ibid., 37-38.

For a man allegedly seasoned by experience, Casaubon has a too complicated style that involves subordination, qualifying phrases and clauses, complicated shadings of emphasis. His style is in itself an exercise of critical discrimination *not yet accomplished*. His very style – glossed over by sterile intellectuality – is expected to blur the rendering of experience and even falsify it. Even if the reader expects Dorothea to look at her suitor's love letter with a critical eye, she does not dismiss it in pungent terms. As a result, she tries her best to write "a hand in which each letter [is] distinguishable without any large range of conjecture (…) to save Mr Casaubon's eyes" and answers affirmatively to his marriage proposal, admitting that she can look forward to "no better happiness"[40] than that which would be life next to him, as his research amanuensis. His arid and appalling little speech is again met with enthusiasm by Eliot's young female character putting her trust precipitously in the "affable archangel" of her dreams:

> "The great charm of your sex is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own. (…) my satisfactions have been those of the solitary student. I have been little disposed to gather flowers that would wither in my hand, but now I shall pluck them with eagerness, to place them in your bosom."[41]

One can hardly ignore the contrast between Casaubon's opaque writing style and Dorothea's emotional feedback. Eliot undoubtedly wants her readers to notice this contrast. In fact, she goes out of her way to draw attention to Dorothea's blindness to Casaubon's mediocre theological scholarship and dry-as-dust aspirations. Dorothea's "extreme simplicity" and "natural (…) idiom"[42] is suppressed throughout her marital life. Thus, what easily comes across here is the hesitancy and the timidity that mark her questions in chapter 37 ("May I talk to you a little instead?"[43]) or in chapter 48 ("May I come out to you in the garden presently?"[44]) as opposed to the directness and the firmness of her ardent "exclamatory style" and her "imaginative use of analogy"[45] in linking Sir Chettam to "a *cochon de lait*" (which indicates that in her maiden years she had been taught a smattering of foreign languages) prior to her

[40] Ibid., 39.

[41] Ibid., 43-44.

[42] Derek Oldfield, "The Language of the Novel. The Character of Dorothea," in *Middlemarch. Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: The Athlone Press, 1967), 74. Derek Oldfield pondered this issue of Dorothea's language use change in *The Language of the Novel*, one of the chapters embedded within a collection of essays on Eliot's much-discussed novel, *Middlemarch. Critical Approaches to the Novel* (1967). The author neatly mapped the stylistic incompatibility between Dorothea and Casaubon in considering the characters' speech mannerisms.

[43] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 322.

[44] Ibid., 414.

[45] Derek Oldfield, "The Language of the Novel. The Character of Dorothea.", in *Middlemarch. Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: The Athlone Press, 1967), 74-77.

marriage and in her widowhood. The reader should not, at this point, jump to conclusions about Casaubon's frigid rhetoric being insincere. Although Casaubon's manner may seem to us far pettier than Dorothea imagines it to be, we ought to avoid quick condemnations of his suitability as a lover such as those circulating amongst Dorothea's friends and relatives. He may not be the "affable archangel"[46] of Dorothea's dreams, but the reader should take him seriously nevertheless, troubling as he may be. The opening paragraph of Chapter 7 offers a first hint about how Casaubon regards the whole situation:

> "Mr. Casaubon, as might be expected, spent a great deal of his time at the Grange in these weeks, and the hindrance which courtship occasioned to the progress of his great work—the *Key to all Mythologies*—naturally made him look forward the more eagerly to the happy termination of courtship. But he had deliberately incurred the hindrance, having made up his mind that it was now time for him to adorn his life with the graces of female companionship, to irradiate the gloom which fatigue was apt to hang over the intervals of studious labor with the play of female fancy, and to secure in this, his culminating age, the solace of female tendance for his declining years. Hence he determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. (…) Nevertheless, he observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable previsions of marriage. It had once or twice crossed his mind that possibly there was some deficiency in Dorothea to account for the moderation of his abandonment; but he was unable to discern the deficiency, or to figure to himself a woman who would have pleased him better (…)."[47]

3. The Rosamond Vincy/Tertius Lydgate storyline

Another professional man with intellectual leanings, Tertius Lydgate, is shown as a character whose future and talents are open to new possibilities. Casaubon's backward-looking and out-of-date research into antiquity is placed in sharp contrast with the forward-looking doctor Lydgate's progressive scientific research in biology. In presenting Tertius Lydgate to her readers, Eliot again moves from surface features of his character to a full inner life history. This change in orientation parallels the very act of reading, as to read and to interpret inevitably entails a shift of focus from outward appearance to inward reality, from one character to another, from one place to another and so on and so forth. This shift of focus used by Eliot to present her characters articulates the tension between what people are in reality and how Middlemarch society reads them. When Lydgate enters the social scene of *Middlemarch*, the emphasis is placed mainly on his professional role (especially in chapters 10, 11 and 13), on how he comes to cause a stir in other people's lives (chapter 10), first and foremost in

[46] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 20.
[47] Ibid., 55.

Rosamond Vincy's life (chapter 12). Lydgate is then by and large introduced as a second-rate character at the dinner party and in relation to Rosamond and Fred Vincy (both shown to be the beneficiaries of a gentlewoman and a gentleman's education), only later on becoming a prominent figure and answering the purposes of chapter 11. Book II, in fact, is mainly about Lydgate and how he adjusts to a new life in Middlemarch, where he intends to achieve his professional goals – both in terms of scientific research and in terms of medical treatment as a country practitioner.

Eliot's *charmeuse* is no pre-Victorian Saint Theresa. She is endowed, for a change, with "that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date."[48] As the text of *Middlemarch* will further show, the portrait of Rosamond lays bare far from angelic truths about this woman who initially seems to be an ideal mistress of the hearth. She is shown to have certain dreams about Lydgate and does not embody, even for a split second, an instance of wifely help for a man with great scientific ambitions. Lydgate wants to get at the origin of the smallest element of which everything is made. Rosamond wants to obtain, however, via sentimental scheming, an opportunity to rise in rank and to subjugate a husband that has nothing to do with her vulgar Middlemarch suitors. Her self-serving religiosity is placed in sharp contrast with Dorothea's yearning to assist others. Do Dorothea and Rosamond exist to show that neither intellectually alive nor purely ornamental women can achieve greatness on an epic scale? The novel seems to endorse the idea that both women who function as their husbands' research apprentices and women who display a love of luxury learned from novels and long for the thrill of foreignness are part of the tragedy of unfulfilled aspirations.

Two related concerns – vocation and marriage – are prominent in the novel at every turn. It is no wonder that Rosamond and Lydgate fail to understand each other – the first is meant to have a domestic career, the second a professional one. Rosamond is committed entirely to her own self and takes "the world as un udder to feed [her] supreme [self]."[49] Her natural self is completely at odds with her social self. Lydgate is zealous in his attention to diagnostic medicine and anatomical research, thus to serving the greater good of society. Lydgate, as a stranger, is "absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance."[50] For a philomath like Lydgate, tempted to think that "there is a common language between women and men,"[51] as a poor but very ambitious young doctor, taking a wife is not a matter of "adornment" and clearly not an urgent business ("Lydgate believed that he should not marry for several years: not marry until he had trodden out a good clear path for himself away from the broad road which was quite ready made"), yet the ideal woman, in his view, ought to be

[48] Ibid., 231.
[49] Ibid., 184.
[50] Ibid., 104.
[51] Ibid., 139.

"grace herself (…) perfectly lovely and accomplished."[52] Women with Dorothea's turn of mind or plain women (such as Mary Garth) he regarded with the same critical, science-based lens with which he approached philosophy. The presence of a Mary Garth or a Dorothea Brooke in Lydgate's life, full to the brim with nothing other than hope, would have been "as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form" and not as arresting as "reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes and blue eyes for a heaven"[53], which reinforces the nineteenth-century idea according to which men were entitled to wend their way across the world to exercise their talents and women were expected to fit into a paradigm of beauty and innocence.

Lydgate is shown to produce cliches about Rosamond's heavenly qualities, converting the concerns the Puritans once had with godliness and grace into a secularized (and, I might add, trivialized) preference for the goodness and divinity of accomplished women like Rosamond. The portrait of Rosamond does seem to pay lip service to the ideal of the angel in the house. Our nineteenth-century Io, Rosamond, seems to have "the true melodic charm" that a Victorian maiden is expected to possess, an "excellent taste in costume", a "nymph-like figure"[54] recognized as "the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage."[55] In fact, Mrs. Lemon herself "had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional."[56] Rosamond does not have the intelligence of William Makepeace Thackeray's Becky Sharp, but she has "that victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy in impetuous resistance. What she liked to do was to her the right thing, and all her cleverness was directed to getting the means of doing it"[57] and a similar aim: to marry a man with titled relations. However, Eliot debunks the popular belief that a perfectly accomplished young woman taught to serve her own self and educated for a life of passivity can ever make a professional man's research apprentice and reinvests it with new valences – an imperfectly taught woman cannot sympathize with her husband's progressive, scientific research aims, who yearns for greatness on an epic scale (in fact, nor can a backward-looking man like Casaubon, interested in out-of-date research into antiquity ever prove to be a hero of erudition for his incompletely educated wife).

Eliot makes it clear (in a time period in which the novel took up a new lease of life, a new seriousness and social concern, replacing romantic ideas with revolutionary ones) that these ornamental women – for all their passivity and adorable goodness, their graceful behavior exquisite accomplishments – suffer from the vice of individualism, are vulnerable to false

[52] Ibid., 83.
[53] Ibid., 84.
[54] Ibid., 83-84.
[55] Ibid., 85.
[56] Ibid., 84-85.
[57] Ibid., 502.

judgements (Lydgate offered Rosamond "vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank"[58]), have a bitter and empty existence and live vicariously through their men's reputation and public activities. They are the product of "an expensive education which [succeeds] in nothing but in giving [them] extravagant idle habits,"[59] to quote the banker and philanthropist Nicholas Bulstrode, who brings about Lydgate's medical downfall (and whose charitable impulses are closely probed and again tap into the conflict between *appearance* and *reality*). Even by bringing Bulstrode and the Middlemarch view of Bulstrode into narrative relief (it appears that the very pillar of respectability in Middlemarch is, after all, not that respectable), Eliot shows that rough-and-ready judgements in 'reading' character are actively at work in *Middlemarch*. He is surely a less attractive figure than Dorothea, but he too lives in a society that dismisses his loftier purposes and knows *nothing* about him. Right reading and foolproof reading criteria have no place in the world of Middlemarch: Lydgate's intellectual passion is everything that Casaubon's is not (disinterested, generous, socially and intellectually creative), yet he does not wed a Dorothea "trying to be what her husband wished"[60] who is under the impression that there is no other lamp besides knowledge and "learned men [keep] the only oil."[61]

4. The Mary Garth/Fred Vincy Storyline

Significant effects would be lost if the Fred/Mary story were completely deleted from Book 3. The Garths represent, in *Middlemarch*, that side of the Victorian world that has not been affected by idleness, frivolity or pedantry. The Garths are constantly embroiled in productive energy and represent a variant of that useful creative life Dorothea yearns for. Her social standing, her womanhood, the forceful conditions of her day, all nip in the bud her efforts to live a grand life. One should remember that one of Dorothea's plans is to obtain new cottages for the laborers on the estate, which is, unsurprisingly, the type of work that might intrigue Caleb Garth, an honest man devoted to business (for whom business involves the type of self-abandonment that defines Dorothea and Lydgate in their attempts to make the world a much better place), who depends upon the good sense of his wife while professing his career.

For Henry James, however, *Middlemarch* is "a treasure-house of details, but (…) an indifferent whole."[62] Too much narrative space, James complains, has been given to Fred Vincy, at the expense of Dorothea, an altogether "too superb a heroine to be wasted,"[63] in order to replicate English village life forty years before his remarks were made. Although I do not intend to argue with Henry James, since Fred Vincy and Mary Garth are, on the face of it,

[58] Ibid., 104.
[59] Ibid., 111.
[60] Ibid., 409.
[61] Ibid., 76.
[62] Henry James, "Middlemarch," in *The Art of Criticism. Henry James on the Theory and Practice of Fiction*, eds. William Veeder and Susan M. Griffin (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 48.
[63] Ibid., 50.

commonplace characters minimally interesting in their own right, without any special talents, social standing or the expectations of Dorothea, Casaubon, Lydgate and Rosamond, the interweaving of the three main stories of *Middlemarch* actually involves the external reader in a process similar to the one undertaken by Eliot's central figures, who have to learn for themselves the importance of *point of view* – a well-informed and sympathetic awareness of varied human predicaments each seen from the standpoint of the individual involved. Fred Vincy, the potential inheritor of Featherstone's fortune, is an important part of the overall social malaise of the novel, which Eliot wants her readers to consider in light of the harmful effects of his misdirected school education and damaging early upbringing grooming him for a mistaken social costume – the clergy. Like Dickens's Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*, Fred Vincy exhibits a buoyancy and gaiety of character and displacement of purpose that make him careless with the Garths' resources and more prone to make facile assumptions about career prospects and professional roles in pre-Victorian Britain. Dorothea, thus, often recedes into a background of conversation about her or about her fictional neighbors, which proves that every character in the novel is background information for another character who is affected by tunnel vision and fails to see objects or subjects unless they are in front of him or her.

Within the little world of Middlemarch, Farebrother and the Garths emulate Eliot's own emancipation. Mary Garth, for instance, "a plain girl,"[64] "very fond of reading,"[65] retains nothing from Rosamond's extravagant idle habits or Dorothea's secular idealism, since her ideas of cleverness are rooted in the hardships of characters such as Juliet, Ophelia, Hamlet, Mordaunt Merton and Corinne. As opposed to Maggie Tulliver, another dark, talented heroine interested in reading the histories of sibylline heroines such as Corinne in Madame de Staël's romantic novel *Corinne*, Mary Garth feels no ties of love and pity binding her to an unlettered brother does not think a male guide and champion will save her from the bitter trials of her life and assist her in her quest for knowledge. Maggie does not have, as Mary has, a mother who can set a good example. What emerges from the description of Mrs. Garth is the sense that even Victorian strong-minded women are endowed with loyalty and submissiveness to their husbands' authority because they believe (or, rather, are trained to believe) that they ought to be "severe towards [their] own sex, which in [their] opinion was framed to be entirely subordinate."[66] To forge strong links between the fictional life of the novel and the real life of her readers, Eliot sends anyone interested in Mary Garth into the street to look for people who look like her. At other times, Eliot conjures up a reader who can notice Lydgate's "spots of commonness"[67] (his attraction to French utopian thinking, his idealism). Certainly all the characters in Middlemarch overlap and flow into each other to construct for the reader a general description of human nature, a penetrating comment on the ubiquitous collective "we". Although Eliot is not in the pulpit against her characters or against similarly constructed

[64] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (United Kingdom: Alma Classics, 1871-72), 90.
[65] Ibid., 99.
[66] Ibid., 209.
[67] Ibid., 130.

readers, other characters (for instance, the Vincys or Featherstone's relatives) do not easily avoid blunt condemnations and flat moral assertions. Susan Garth can both settle into domestic contentment "with her sleeves turned above her elbows, deftly handling her pastry"[68] and teach her own children and other pupils, which can be considered by various readers as either admirable or contemptible:

> "[Mrs. Garth] was disproportionately indulgent towards the failings of men, and was often heard to say that these were natural. (…) the passage from governess into housewife had wrought itself a little too strongly into her consciousness, and she rarely forgot that while her grammar and accent were above the town standard, she wore a plain cap, cooked the family dinner, and darned all the stockings. She had sometimes taken pupils in a peripatetic fashion, making them follow her about in the kitchen with their book or slate. She thought it good for them to see that she could make an excellent lather while she corrected their blunders "without looking,"—that a woman with her sleeves tucked up above her elbows might know all about the Subjunctive Mood or the Torrid Zone—that, in short, she might possess "education" and other good things ending in "tion," and worthy to be pronounced emphatically, without being a useless doll. When she made remarks to this edifying effect, she had a firm little frown on her brow, which yet did not hinder her face from looking benevolent, and her words which came forth like a procession were uttered in a fervid agreeable contralto. Certainly, the exemplary Mrs. Garth had her droll aspects, but her character sustained her oddities, as a very fine wine sustains a flavor of skin."[69]

No other married couple in the novel (perhaps except from Mary and Fred at the novel's conclusion, though the days of their courtship cannot be used as a yardstick) fits into a framework that combines marriage and professional success victoriously like Susan and Caleb Garth's relationship does. Though much of their gender roles are born of convention, the Garths allow each other to live a purposeful life by way of complementarity. The Vincys often criticize Susan Garth's decision to take on teaching before and while being married, which endorses the way their society viewed the idea of female vocation within matrimony as a kind of undesirable bondage. Susan Garth adores her husband's virtues and respects his unfaltering passion for "a fine bit of work"[70] despite the relative poverty to which his interests condemn the entire family. Female Middlemarchers are not to issue private judgements or to make interpretations, but to submit, in passive obedience, to men's creative power. This is the kind of marital servitude (in fact, a cleverly held female-male balance) Dorothea desires and Rosamond dismisses, for the latter is always able to "frustrate [her husband] by stratagem" and merely functions as the basil plant which "[flourishes] wonderfully on a murdered man's

[68] Ibid., 210.
[69] Ibid., 209.
[70] Ibid., 347.

brains,"[71] a highly suggestive literary allusion to John Keats' poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, where horror is only camouflaged as romance. Lorenzo, Isabella's lover, is murdered and his head is cut off and put out of sight in a pot, with a basil plant on top. Likewise, the narrative process in *Middlemarch* gradually betrays troubling depths in the pre-Hardyesque relationship of Lydgate (who sacrifices his scientific hopes and dies early) and Rosamond (a dependent woman like Keats' Isabella herself) that the macabre pictorialism of Keats' poem flattens out.

Conclusions

In its treatment of the metaphors of marriage and vocation through the three subplots brought to the forefront in the present study – the Dorothea Brooke/Edward Casaubon subplot, the Rosamond Vicny/Tertius Lydgate subplot, and the Mary Garth/Fred Vincy subplot – *Middlemarch* reveals something static about its characters that we cannot explain away by saying it belongs to the slower-paced days of Reform or to an era profoundly divided between the (male) public sphere and the (female) private sphere: characters marry in the grip of a major illusion about their partners. This illusion feeds off of the Victorian world as a whole. Eliot's characters marry in the grip of misguided reading – the paragraphs cited above bear testimony to the fact that both Dorothea and Casaubon respond to each other as if they were readers enduing textual matter with their own feelings. They never accept one another with the comfort and the assurance of reciprocal understanding. In the world of *Middlemarch*, marital incompatibility is not only a matter of one character being misread and terribly interpreted by another. It is always about female and male characters failing each other in their powers of interpretation. Female characters believe they cannot hold a candle to their male companions, male characters entertain the idea that their lighted candles are the only centers of illumination that matter.

What the Rosamond/Lydgate situation adds to the story of Dorothea Brooke is a set of comparable traits and a general comment on humans' fall into delusion and then ascent to gradual enlightenment. In fact, all three interrelated stories – Dorothea Brooke/Edward Casaubon, Rosamond Vincy/Tertius Lydgate, Mary Garth/Fred Vincy – show an organic union between the individual and society. The characterization strategies Eliot uses place individuals in a densely specific social environment and combine their strands of experience to voice a unified verdict. Thus, Dorothea is not alone in her delusion. Even on a first reading one can easily see how, when the multiple character-groupings begin to form, shared myopia in the Middlemarch world signals just how blind all human beings can be at "this great spectacle of life."[72] George Eliot tests the characters' ambitions by their own methods of interpretations, simultaneously showing them in a provincial context that frustrates their expectations. One obvious question arises, then. Are the characters' methods of interpretation flawed? Eliot's awareness of the impossibility of advancing full answers to this question is what both vitalizes

[71] Ibid., 717-718.
[72] Ibid., 234.

and constrains her prose. Her readers-as-interpreters, however, must taste the bitter fruit of experience and warned against hasty judgements.

Romance and antiromance, symbolic and literal reading, creative power and passive submission are placed side by side for the external reader who, as a participant in the perpetual activity of making and remaking meaning from *Middlemarch*, has the final word. The reader has already witnessed how uneasy Eliot is with romance and fanciful plots. *Middlemarch* is not granted an orthodox romantic closure, but a narrative ending showing that the scripts in which the characters believe themselves to be living are, in fact, not *real*, only *imagined*. One is always left wondering, in reading about Dorothea Brooke, Susan Garth or Harriet Bulstrode, whether their internalization of servitude ultimately finds them continuing to support the disequilibrium of power between men and women and its inheritance. Lydgate's choice of Rosamond is born out of his tendency to judge both people and events generically, not in terms of their individuality. The reader is here brought face to face with the fact that the doctrine of separate spheres in Victorian Britain manifests itself in both familial and larger contexts, keeping men and women damagingly apart. When the marriage of Rosamond and Lydgate is on the verge of falling apart, Eliot shows her reader that it is Dorothea, a woman of great intellectual power shut out from public display, who is granted the power of intercession ("Where women love each other, men learn to smother their mutual dislike"[73]). Eliot saves Maggie Tulliver from self-sacrificial options and worldly compromise in *The Mill on the Floss*, but allows Dorothea Brooke the virtue of resignation and invests her with the role of the *mother*, which some readers may regard as a sublimation of one's individual desires, others as an important sphere of productivity in its own right. Dorothea's son is expected to inherit the Tipton estate, which suggests that Middlemarch will continue to exist as a natural part of history, with its eternally unresolved questions about women's rights and duties, their status and their power.

[73] Ibid., 719.