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WOMEN, ENERGY, AND *MIDDLEMARCH*

Lee R. Edwards

MIDDLEMARCH IS A NOVEL about imaginative energy—the mental power to envision a self and a society as yet unformed in the given world—as this force is related to will and to society. A record of the general inability of will to call up energy sufficient not just to envision but to create new social forms, it is particularly interesting in its examination of the nature and fate of energy in female characters. Contrary to her heroines, Mary Ann Evans in her own life found both energy and will sufficient to enable her to abandon her provincial home in favor of London, break with family and religion, live openly for years with a man not her husband, and, most important, transform herself into George Eliot in whose name she wrote her books, earned her living and survived the world's real or imagined hostilities. Although we do not know what psychic stress, what sense of excessive payment rendered, caused George Eliot to reject this biographical pattern to construct instead a fictional universe where nerve and personality give way before the forces of social and natural conservatism, the defensive posture of her statement, "I should wish it to be understood that I should never invite anyone to come and see me who did not ask for the invitation," perhaps gives hints.

Despite its final failures, however, energy in *Middlemarch* initially resides in many characters: in Lydgate, Fred Vincy, Rosamond, even Casaubon, and above all, in Dorothea Brooke. Indeed, it is the force of this last character's imagination, her questing nature and desire to be both wise and useful, that illuminates the book. This illumination, arising from the rare portrayal of energy and intellectual force conjoined in an admirable female character causes *Middlemarch* to be a kind of talisman for many young women. Recognizing George Eliot as a greater writer than Louisa May Alcott, we transfer our allegiance from Jo March to Dorothea. That George Eliot's view is both more complex and more ambivalent than I had first believed is what I hope to show.

But, like Portnoy, before I can begin analysis, I find it necessary to talk at some length about myself because I find myself writing, for the first time, as a woman critic, and I am not sure of the implications of the combined form, of the effect the feminine adjective has when used to modify the critical noun. In *A Room of One's Own,* Virginia Woolf discusses the relation between women and fiction, a relationship still unharmonious because the world

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has not seen fit to provide us with rooms of our own, much less £500 a year and access to power's inner sanctums. But no one has yet defined the connection between women and criticism. And if I dare compare great things with small, I would like to examine here not the space Virginia Woolf explored—the open ocean writers need to write in—but merely the small pool that critics need for their creations.

Only by using myself as a case history and assuming the case is not unique but typical, can I trace the peculiar relationship of George Eliot's work not just to me, but to women in general. By so doing, I hope to show why *Middlemarch* has been a sacred text for so many of us, why women have infinitely fewer of these texts than men do, why I felt both angry and sad when I discovered that what I had seen as revolution was in fact reaction. I want, then, to talk not only, and not first, about women and energy in *Middlemarch,* but about women and energy in life, since life affects the critical concepts which any of us—women and men alike—are prepared to focus on literature or even on a specific work.

In Woolfian terms, the woman critic is a small fish, perhaps, yet still she swims among the coral groves. The minnow may prove interesting if only we can catch her. And since critics, like others of God's creatures, are born children, you will perhaps not mourn if our initial cast nets an undergraduate. Look to the young form and you will see, perhaps more easily because more crudely apparent, the scales and barbs that age has smoothed or at least taught the survivors to disguise. As an undergraduate, then, I sat through a semester of introductory philosophy eagerly awaiting that section of the course which was supposed to deal with what was called the mind/body problem. This topic appeared on the syllabus in the week between the idea of God in the western world and the problem of ethical judgment, and attracted me primarily because I was sure it was going to be about sex. My philosophical inadequacies were clearly shown when the subject yielded first a bishop pondering the material world and then Dr. Johnson kicking a stone and exclaiming "Thus, I refute Berkeley!," an interesting statement, to be sure, but hardly what I had in mind.

The history of philosophy to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems to me now that my earlier notion is, for the critic, largely correct, as criticism still concerns itself with denying that minds exist in bodies which are, for the most part, either one sex or another. Negating sex, criticism instead seeks to order its words in such a way that they will be taken for the products of a disembodied intellect whose reality, like Berkeley's, presumably derives from an existence in the mind of God. True, we have learned to distrust

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the vulgarized Arnoldian stance which asserts that the best critics and the best books are joined together in some timeless realm, locked in a dance whose movements are unaffected by wind and weather no less than by the more ponderous rhythms of politics, history, or culture. If the Happy Isle does not exist, then let there be Marxists, Freudians, and structuralists; let there be meat eaters or vegetarians, for all we care. But, for politeness's sake, and so we may retain the comforting memory of Arnold's great, good place, let us always write as though we assumed we were objective.

Like Zen riddlers who ask about the sound of one hand clapping, critics covertly pose their own conundrum concerning the body which writes the words of a disembodied mind: whatever its other qualities it is implicitly masculine. Clothed in men's garments, the mind can still distill its ether pure. Choosing examples more or less randomly, we note for instance, that Wallace Stevens conjures with the figure of youth as a virile poet and that Geoffrey Hartman describes Northrup Frye with "Copernicus's image of the 'virile man standing in the sun . . . overlooking the planets'."[1] Neither Stevens nor Hartman, I suppose, is deliberately—or probably even consciously—orienting all of poetry or criticism in terms of a male image. They are merely doing what is natural for men—whether poets, critics, or plumbers—creating a universe out of the reality of their own bodies. That body, however, has become everyone's; man equals person.

And if the critic's nature is otherwise, if it is, for example, not even possibly virile, let it assume men's garments and adopt the masculine stance. If it can and does, critic will still be stamped on its hand; it will gain leave to join the dance. But, let it refuse and make an unseemly show of its difference from the presumed ideal and the critics unite like the confederate ladies who froze Scarlett O'Hara out of the ball. Not a critic, they cry, but a partisan, a biased polemecist, a distorter of truth. Let it write, let it dance, if it must, but let it do so someplace else.

And to prevent this embarrassment from arising too often, let us train each new generation to read as though each and all of it were male. Simplify the task because—again, not through conspiracy, but through social and cultural fact—the literature which survives is largely that written by countless generations of men. Win imaginative assent to these books and their abstract patterns and you have created in the assenting reader a piece of the mind that made them.

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[1] *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958–1970,* New Haven and London, 1970, p. 24.

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Thus, like most women, I have gone through my entire education —as both student and teacher—as a schizophrenic, and I do not use this term lightly, for madness is the bizarre but logical conclusion of our education. Imagining myself male, I attempted to create myself male. Although I knew the case was otherwise, it seemed I could do nothing to make this other critically real.

Turning again to the undergraduate wriggling in the meshes of this net, to my past self that is, I remember that, for the most part I read books about men, even when they weren't by or specifically for them. This reading shaped my thoughts in ways known to all women who have shared this experience, just as it is known to all Blacks whose intellects and imaginations were formed and deformed by texts created by and for a white majority who were assumed to be not merely more numerous but also morally, socially, culturally, and even physically normative.

The first result of my reading was a feeling that male characters were at the very least more interesting than women to the authors who invented them. Thus if, reading their books as it seemed their authors intended, I naively identified with a character, I repeatedly chose men; I would rather have been Hamlet than Ophelia, Tom Jones instead of Sophia Western, and, perhaps despite Dostoevsky's intentions, Raskolnikov not Sonia.

More peculiar perhaps, but sadly unsurprising, were the assessments I accepted about fictional women. For example, I quickly learned that power was unfeminine and that powerful women were, quite literally, monstrous. Although, or perhaps because, their power had a strange attraction, women of this sort appeared in fiction as threats not just to men but to all of society. If you think of Clytemnestra or Lady Macbeth, or even of the more ambiguous and ultimately less powerful Kate Croy, Becky Sharp, or Emma Woodhouse, and do not think, as I did not, that society is simply a polite term for the organization and expression of masculine norms, your conclusions, like mine, and like those of the authors who created them, assume the force of an inevitable theorem. Bitches all, they must be eliminated, reformed, or, at the very least condemned. Those rare women who are shown in fiction as both powerful and, in some sense, admirable are such because their power is always based, if not on beauty, then at least on sexuality. Think of Cleopatra, the Wife of Bath, Molly Bloom, or even, perhaps, Moll Flanders. Their personal force is not seen as it might be —and as it frequently is in the case of men—as simply the natural product of energy and ambition, but is instead an end in itself, and men who succumb to it lose everything, including, frequently, their masculinity. Thus, the approval given to these women is finally

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equivocal. Since the sexuality of women is always presumed to be uncontainable—if it exists at all—it is therefore perpetually intertwined with the downfall of men. Adam had Eve, but in getting her lost Eden. Antony had Cleopatra and the world may indeed have been well lost; but lost to him, it still remained to Caesar and perhaps the cold Octavia. By implication feminine power, always seen finally as sexual power, is inevitably a trap, the more vicious for being baited not just with sweetness but with the necessity of life itself. To avenge this treachery and continue civilization, it is imaginatively necessary to render women permanently subordinate. Such subordination results in imagining good women to be those who are only weakly sexual. Like society, however, civilization is a term whose exclusively masculine necessities must be ignored for the logic of the proposition to survive.

The stature of a woman character, rare even in contemporary fiction, who is endowed with energy which is not primarily sexual and who, not wishing to hurt others nonetheless aspires to live and, more importantly, to work in that world which is normally called "man's" is diminished even as she is created. She is made, and thus seen, as either amusing, because indelicate or naive, or alternatively, pitiable and finally contemptible because of her confused assumptions about her own nature and that of the world. Think of Isabel Archer in the first part of *Portrait of a Lady* and of Henrietta Stackpole throughout the book; think of Hermione or even the more complexly rendered Gudrun in *Women in Love;* think of Anna and Molly, the "free women" of Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook.* Indeed, I think now, though I did not ten years ago, of the lesson Dorothea Brooke Casaubon learns.

Literature is an admirable pedagogue, teaching by continual repetition, shaping our perspectives by creating the mold into which our imaginations flow. Insofar as I have been aware of the personal implications of these lessons, I have resented them. Until quite recently, however—and by the tracing of what psychic labyrinth and at what cost I still don't know or can not bear to discover—I attempted to remain untouched, aloof. I said simply, and for the most part silently that, since neither those women nor any women whose acquaintances I had made in fiction had much to do with the life I led or wanted to lead, I was not female. Alien from the women I saw most frequently imagined, I mentally arranged them in rows labelled respectively insipid heroines, sexy survivors, and demonic destroyers. As organizer I stood somewhere else, alone perhaps, but hopefully above them.

The few exceptions to these categories, women like Sophocles's Antigone, Richardson's Clarissa, Ibsen's Nora, or even the more

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contemporary Martha Quest or the personae of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems or her novel *The Bell Jar,* led tragic or at least uncertain lives not simply because they were human but specifically because they were female. The contradiction between their inner selves and society's expectations for them as women, took them out of the known world, if not to death then to madness or to the more dreary purgatory of neuroticism.

I waited—and wait still—for the imaginative work which charts this world anew and treats, for example, Nora's survival—not madness, destruction, or death—outside the doll's house. These works depend, I suppose, on a social revolution which would produce women writers who have lived this life, or writers of either sex who have observed it, and found it joyful, by which I mean not trivially carefree but useful, productive, nourishing and only different from, but not worse than, any other sort of life. Alternatively, they depend on the birth of mythmakers whose creative imaginations are powerful enough to forge their tales out of the void which the observed world continues to pose. Such fictional records as we now have of the lives of women who defied society's conventions—and I might add Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* and Agnes Smedley's autobiographical fiction *Daughter of Earth* to the list of those already mentioned—record for the most part lonely and, perhaps for this reason, sterile struggles, labor without birth. They might, I fear, be read as indications that woman outside her traditional role is doomed to misery and madness. Perhaps, instead, this madness is a necessary interlude. These writers state the case in its present form and show, biographically as well as artistically, the frantic strugglings of sensibilities which, recognizing the insufficiency of the existing patterns, are nonetheless unable to create new shapes for life by forging them in fiction. As mediating forms and truthful portraits, these books and their tragic predecessors are vital.

But existence has necessities beyond the tragic and certainly beyond the mad. If people are to continue to live on earth, they need comedies to show them life is possible. Although there are comic forms with male protagonists which end with the hero unmarried but adult, comedies traditionally end in weddings. For women, this formal ending has been inevitable and concludes life as well. Compare the fiery, young, unmarried Natasha with the stout, dull wife she becomes and you will see what I mean. Men can marry, as did Pierre, and can go on being what they were or even continue to evolve. But married women in literature turn into wives, and unless they are bad ones in need of correction, their lives are largely unrecorded. Like Mrs. Gulliver, they are props,

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unfilled sails waiting for their husbands to return and fill them; in all other respects, they are fictively dead.

As a young woman observing this situation, I liked the comic heroine because she was both female and, at least momentarily, alive. I approved of her; I would be her, but always with a condition, a hook catching me back before the end. I could be Shakespeare's Kate or Jane Austen's Emma, but unkissed, unmarried, and hence untamed. Or better, Isabel Archer, initially comedic, setting out to discover myself and the world, blessed by my wit and the sense of my own uniqueness, but somehow miraculously exempt from the divine amusement of God or Henry James. Or best of all, I could be Rosalind, always resourceful, always disguised, ranging freely in the Forest of Arden. But unless I could find a way either to live perpetually in the first three acts or to transform the world to Arden's image, I could not be these characters forever. If I stayed too long, I would have to cast off my wit and with it my power to form views of my own, put on my skirts, and marry. If I were lucky, I might find Mr. Knightley, the good uncle disguised as lover; if I went on too long following my headlong course, Gilbert Osmond would be my fate. And, if I refused to submit to marriage at all, comedy's rigid necessities would move me out of the ingenue's role and into that of the old maid aunt, no longer the serious subject of my own consciousness but instead the object of others' amusement.

While I mused on the possibilities of some new fourth act, my peers and my professors, no more interested than I in the insipid heroines, apostrophized Molly Bloom, the Wife of Bath, or Cleopatra as the epitome of eternal femininity. But if Molly Bloom was woman, what was I? A mutant or a dinosaur. If one was a female but wanted nonetheless a world bigger than even king-sized sheets, where did one go? Nowhere. One disappeared from the fictions and emerged, if at all, only as a hag. If one left the fictions and went to the world, one saw that the road out of comedy led to the apocalypse. In the fifth act one wound up in an asylum burned alive like Zelda Sayre, in a river with a pocketful of stones like Virginia Woolf, with your head in an oven like Sylvia Plath, in a room of one's own in your father's house, wearing white like Emily Dickinson.

Fiction, then, provides us with neither forms for an equal life shared between men and women nor even a set of moral assumptions wide enough to embrace both sexes. True, Cleopatra's essence defied the capacity of mind to conceive or tongue to express, but she was treacherous as well. To see her treachery as the highest expression of the feminine seemed to me a moral betrayal whose magnitude was as great as her beauty. Here, when young, I spoke

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out loud, though awkwardly I'm sure, for the critics were no help and I was not certain why it was important for me to establish Cleopatra's evil as an ethical absolute rather than the natural—and possibly wonderful—product of her sex. In denouncing Cleopatra I was willing the necessity of some single standard in whose terms all people could be judged as replacement for the traditional sexually divided and unequal codes. The experience of the class in which I voiced my discontent still haunts my nightmares. Until my face froze and my brain congealed, I was called prude and, worse yet, insensitive, since I willfully misread the play in the interest of proving a point false both to the work and in itself. Cleopatra was not immoral but wonderful because her sexuality put her beyond morality. But the world has no room for such passion. Passion destroys men, not women—Cleopatra's death immortalizes her—by distracting their attention from its proper objects. Antony should have known better. But Cleopatra? How could she? She was female.

In this context, then, it is not hard to see why *Middlemarch* became one of the "books of my life," to use the phrase Hugh Walpole used in describing his reaction to Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room.* I seized upon George Eliot's novel, and more particularly on the portrait of Dorothea, as indices that my imaginative life was not as lonely and unformulated as I had feared. Like Dorothea, I was a cygnet among ducklings, passionately looking for the great river whose current would carry me to others of my kind. Like her, I had great, half-formed aspirations. Like her, I felt harrassed by pressures to marry some nice young man and abandon my private and no doubt weird ideas. In Rosamond, too, I thought I had found a heroine worthy of my hate, one who was condemned not for her sexuality, but for her weakness, vanity and evil, ethical categories which, in the book at least, superseded sexual definitions. I ignored Mary Garth, mentally sending her to stand at the end of the line of insipid, goody-goody heroines. And, while I noted Dorothea's second marriage, I failed to consider its implications, sanctified as it is by children and by Dorothea's reconciliation with her sister and with a world where the continuity of life is represented by the safe inheritance of entailed estates passing through the male line. I found my new fifth act, or so I thought, because I saw in Dorothea an endorsement I had found in no other book I had read of energy and social commitment on the part of a woman in combination, as I believed, with the promise that these qualities did not render the possessor either a social misfit or a danger to herself or others. In the interests of finding what I badly needed to find in some imaginative work, I had reduced the novel to a comic homily on the possibility of combining marriage with intellectual aspiration.

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I also misread the book. For, while *Middlemarch* is undoubtedly a work which devotes many pages to Dorothea, she is by no means the whole novel. And while energy illuminates the work, its light seems now neither so clear nor so powerful as I once thought, or hoped, it was. For *Middlemarch* is finally not an endorsement of this energy, but first an examination and finally a condemnation of it.

In this condemnation, however, George Eliot is by no means unambivalent, as we can see if we look briefly at the structure of the book. In these terms, *Middlemarch* is peculiarly divided. Both tragic and comic, it divorces its emotional centers—Dorothea and Lydgate and their foils Casaubon and Rosamond—from its ethical pivot. It is the Garths and the other permanent residents of the town who, guaranteeing the enduring life of Middlemarch itself, also provide the moral norms of the book. In this connection it is, I think, significant to note that the action of the book, excluding the Finale, stops before the Reform Bill becomes fact, and the characters who threaten Middlemarch's values are changed (Dorothea), defeated (Lydgate), killed (Casaubon), condemned (Rosamond), or sent away, perhaps into a wider world, or merely into exile.

George Eliot sacrifices energy and personality to place and to the conservative necessities which that place dictates. But her ambivalence toward this sacrifice can be seen and felt if we notice that the book's structural anomalies are reinforced by the treatment character receives as well. The weight of the book's tragic structure is carried by a quartet of characters whose complexity George Eliot both apprehends and renders and whose stories compose the bulk of the book. The book's comic structure, on the other hand, is carried by characters who are frequently little more than caricatures, fragments of identity left over from a Jane Austen or a Dickens novel. With the exception of Mary Garth and Fred Vincy and, if one is being generous, Sir James and Celia, these characters have no stories but only scenes which take up the space between the major narratives.

It is, of course, possible that what I have defined as structural ambivalence was in fact accounted for by George Eliot when she called the book not after one of her major figures but instead *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life.* In other words, the book is neither tragic nor comic but simply realistic, and what in tragic terms is annihilation is for the author, and hence for the reader who would read the book correctly, merely a realistic assessment of the best that can be done in the world, both fictional and real. Even if this position is taken, however, the particular sense of reality which the novel as a whole engenders derives from a tension—implicit and covert, it is true, but nonetheless there—between truncated tragic and attenuated comic modes.

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These modes are linked by the character of Dorothea who, it seems, participates in both and is, for this reason, as well as others more commonly noted, the center of the book. But the linkage is incomplete because for Dorothea to become a comic rather than a tragic heroine she must be transformed from one whose energy is so great as to constitute a threat to her society to one whose power can be contained by it. She is, in a very real sense, not the same character at the book's end that she was at its beginning. Although she leaves Middlemarch she still has a home there and, in claiming it, is herself diminished.

The image of Dorothea presented at the book's beginning is, to borrow a phrase from Simone de Beauvoir, apparently transcendent. To turn to her from Celia, Mary Garth, and Mrs. Garth is to turn from characters and women who are themselves both innately conservative and a cause of conservatism in others, who either have no energies—like Celia—or who ruthlessly suppress them—like Mrs. Garth—who function through stasis to inspire others to return to the fold, to one for whom radical upheaval, both personal and social, seems, at least initially, possible. With her ardent nature, her intelligence, her desire not simply to be good but to discover what might be good in order to use the fruits of this discovery to change the world, Dorothea seems to be a woman whose like had not been fictively recorded in 1871 and whose imaginary history still does not exist. Even today, women readers in particular, feel in the book's opening chapters the promise of a new spiritual incarnation, possibly even an entirely new creation. We wait, almost desperately, for the author's imagination to divine a world whose shadowy existence we have long suspected, but whose reality has been perpetually denied.

But, however much we may wish it otherwise, *Middlemarch* gives very little evidence that George Eliot wished to be the god in some new machine. From Prelude to Finale, and for 86 chapters in between, she tells us instead that in the early part of the nineteenth century in England, a woman whose "passionate ideal nature demanded an epic life" (3),[2] whose inner "flame . . . soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (3) would be defeated or, at best, deflected. George Eliot is writing not the ultimate comedy of some new incarnation, but rather the record of its failure. Seeing a world which lacked "coherent social faith and order"

[2] All references to *Middlemarch* are taken from the Riverside Edition edited with an introduction and notes by Gordon S. Haight, Boston, 1956.

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(3), George Eliot either would or could not choose to create an alternative universe in her fiction. Instead, she records the dislocation which is "offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity," (3), the isolation of the cygnet who "never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind." (4).

This failure could be tragic, however, and Dorothea a tragic character, if and only if her aspirations at the book's beginnings were taken entirely seriously by the author. And they are not. Nor are Dorothea's longings as unfettered by traditional assumptions about the kinds of fulfillment open to women as a cursory reading might seem to indicate. Throughout the book, George Eliot both pities and gently mocks Dorothea. This attitude of sorrowful amusement is not merely consequent upon her marrying Casaubon, but in fact precedes the marriage and exists precisely because Dorothea is the sort of woman who would marry Casaubon in the first place. Dorothea is short-sighted, a physical defect which in this book, as in many, has its psychic implications. Moreover, George Eliot or her narrative surrogate in the book continually addresses and identifies the elder Miss Brooke as "poor Dorothea" and ranges herself regretfully but unequivocally with Celia in her assessment of Dorothea's character. In Chapter 7, for example, it asserts that "Miss Brooke was certainly very naive with all her alleged cleverness. Celia, whose mind had never been thought too powerful, saw the emptiness of other people's pretensions much more readily." (47). This statement, however, is less simple than it seems. Apparently, the pretensions referred to belong to Casaubon, but it is equally possible that they may secondarily refer to Dorothea as well. For, the immediately preceding sentence states that Dorothea "had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband: she wished, poor child, to be wise herself." (47). In other words, it is at least possible that it is not only Casaubon's knowledge which is empty pretense, but also Dorothea's desire for knowledge of her own.

If the possibility that Dorothea's quest for knowledge was, at best, misguided were raised only here, the passage would hardly be worth noting. But it is not. Indeed, George Eliot repeatedly insists on the futility and even foolishness of any desire to find an outlet for energy in the acquisition of wisdom defined narrowly as education and dissociates Dorothea from Casaubon by saying that "it would be a great mistake to suppose that Dorothea would have cared about any share in Casaubon's learning as mere accomplishment." (63). On the contrary, she seems to be saying that Dorothea's desire for knowledge is a confused expression of her true

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longing for a combined moral and intellectual guidance, an analogue in the nineteenth-century world and in her own life to the force which the Catholic faith provided for Saint Theresa. Unable to find her "ideal of life" in the "walled-in maze" which constitutes the usual occupations open to a woman of the leisured class, Dorothea sees knowledge as offering the only way out of the labyrinth. But the radical implications of this vision are tempered since both Dorothea and her creator see this knowledge in terms of a "union which . . . would . . . give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path." (21). This union is not a transcendent linking of the mind with abstract principles systematically combining wisdom and morality, but is instead mediated by physical reality and institutionalized.

Desiring to lead "a grand life here—now—in England" (21), neither Dorothea nor George Eliot can see a way to realize this desire directly. "Since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction" (64), and more interestingly, since George Eliot does not even consider the possibility of educational reform as a way out of Dorothea's dilemma, marriage becomes the educating institution. In marrying Casaubon, Dorothea is mistaken merely about the contents of this knowledge, but not about the form through which such knowledge should come to her.

When Dorothea says that "people may really have in them some vocation which is not quite plain to themselves," (60), she is speaking to Casaubon about Will. We, however, may hear her words as unwittingly self-referential and, more significantly, as revealing as well George Eliot's own bafflement with certain aspects of Dorothea's character. For, at the book's beginning, Dorothea is like Will, a character in search of a vocation, a form in which her spiritual and social energies can be harmonized and through which they can be directed in order to affect the world at large. Since, however, George Eliot has drawn Dorothea as a character to whom "permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve" (144) was impossible, her search for a vocation is cut short almost before it begins. In contrast to Will, who has not only time but space in which to try on different roles, Dorothea does not. And where Will can attempt and reject a number of vocations before finding his niche as a member of Parliament, Dorothea can not. Unlike Will, Dorothea has only two alternatives: she can marry or she can remain a spinster. But even this choice is more apparent than real. Dorothea *must* marry. For unmarried and not endowed with the strength for permanent rebellion, there is no way for her even to begin to find for herself the wisdom she desires. Unmarried

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and untutored, she can only devise plans for cottages whose fireplaces may well interfere with their stairways. And even were her plans correct, she can not build the cottages in any case, having neither the money nor, more importantly, the courage to do so on her own. Like Kate Chopin's Edna Pontellier, she lacks the strong wings necessary for the artist: her wish for freedom is always checked by her equally strong desire to submit. And if, for whatever reasons, we ignore both sides of the equation George Eliot has set up throughout the book for defining Dorothea's character, the book's ending becomes as incomprehensible as many critics have found it to be.

Why, it is asked, does Dorothea marry Will? Because the answer to this question is most often given in terms which account for the marriage by opposing Will's presumed sensuality to Casaubon's sterility, even those posing this solution are unhappy with it and condemn the author for failing to make Dorothea's savior more sexually viable. Sexuality, however, does not provide the key to Will's significance, though the truth of this statement may indeed point to a gap in George Eliot's perceptions. Far from being an erotic radical, a pre-Lawrencian Mellors saving Dorothea by his phallic force, Will is instead a social reformer who finds a vocation which can use his romantic vision when, at the book's conclusion he is transformed into "an ardent public man" (610), and through Dorothea's adjective, into a version of Dorothea herself. Since wrongs exist and since Will is in the thick of a struggle against them, George Eliot establishes him as a husband for Dorothea, who can "give him wifely help" (611) of just the sort she wanted to give Casaubon but could not. What *Middlemarch* is missing then is a more powerful rendering of both Ladislaw's physical presence and his social vision. We know he would reform, but what and how we know not. We know that Dorothea would help him, but don't know the exact nature of her help.

At this point, however, some real problems concerning Dorothea's second marriage do intrude themselves. The objection is not that Dorothea should have married Will but that she should have married anybody at all, that she should ultimately be denied the opportunity given Will to find her own paths and forge her energies into some new mold. Acknowledging that "many who know her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother," (611), George Eliot acknowledges the fact that Dorothea is a character who might have been fulfilled in a wider world than the one she as author finally provides. But she also claims that "no one stated exactly what else

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that was in her power she ought rather to have done" (611); looking outward, George Eliot simply could not find this new and bigger world. The religion which inspired Antigone and Saint Theresa to perform their heroic deeds alone is gone. And to fill this vacuum George Eliot found it necessary to impose tradition, widening it a bit to allow Mary Garth to write a book and Dorothea to go to London, but stopping short of a full exploration of a world which would have had its birth not in reality's mirror but in the artist's will. We could perhaps have had this vision if the author held the mirror to reflect not only the world both she and Dorothea knew and left behind but also that one she forced into existence when she stopped being Mary Ann Evans and became George Eliot instead. In *Middlemarch,* however, George Eliot refuses this option and accepts a safety not entirely celebrated but rather tinged with resignation, ambivalently regarded.

It is, however, only when we draw away from Dorothea to look instead at Rosamond that the reasons for George Eliot's ambivalent attitude toward Dorothea's energy become clear. In thus moving, we are not travelling so great a distance as it might at first appear. Although Rosamond is in many ways Dorothea's opposite, they are opposed as two sides of the same coin are opposed and are centrally bonded by the common metal of their energy. It is usual to see Rosamond as simply the typical nineteenth-century heroine exposed by the persistent hostility of George Eliot's vision. This view seems to me both distorted and reductive, for it fails to take note of precisely that facet of Rosamond's character which is most interesting: the strength of her will. Like Jay Gatsby, Rosamond would spring from her own Platonic image of herself. Formed like him out of a mixed romanticism and vulgarity, her reckless will is finally even stronger than Dorothea's because it is not tempered as Dorothea's was by either the cooling winds of self-effacement or the broadening channels of social concern. What she wants is simply her own way out of Middlemarch. But her way, like Dorothea's is defined throughout the book in society's terms, though Rosamond's society is, to be sure, more limited because more narrowly class and money conscious than Dorothea's. And, like Dorothea, Rosamond cannot get her way, cannot gain both the freedom from Middlemarch's constrictions and the material perquisites she feels are due her without a husband.

In the last part of his essay *The Subjection of Women,*[3] pub-

[3] The quotations from Mill are taken from the excellent *Essays on Sex Equality* by John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, edited and with an introductory essay by Alice S. Rossi, Chicago and London, 1970.

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lished just two years before *Middlemarch,* John Stuart Mill provides a beautiful abstract for the Rosamond-Lydgate marriage seen against a matrix in which the woman's will to power is strengthened proportionally as her capacities for personal liberty are denied by the combined forces of social conventions both external and internal. I can do no better than to quote from the essay:

> An active an energetic mind, if denied liberty, will seek for power: refused the command of itself, it will assert its personality by attempting to control others. To allow to any human beings no existence of their own but what depends on others, is giving far too high a premium on bending others to their purposes. Where liberty cannot be hoped for, and power can, power becomes the grand object of human desire; those to whom others will not leave the undisturbed management of their own affairs, will compensate themselves, if they can, by meddling for their own purposes with the affairs of others. Hence also women's passion for personal beauty, and dress and display; and all the evils that flow from it. . . . The love of power and the love of liberty are in eternal antagonism. Where there is least liberty, the passion for power is the most ardent and unscrupulous. (238)

Denied liberty, denied an education which would foster the formation of a personal vision which might then be tested against society's claims, Rosamond becomes, as she must, society's agent, in Mill's terms, a "hostage to Mrs. Grundy." (229).

Like Mill, George Eliot has a powerful awareness of the destructiveness of Rosamond's energy. And, as is the case with Dorothea, she can find nothing to do with it, no place to put it once the possibility of wifely submission is denied. Thus, what I have called George Eliot's conservatism is finally both the logical conclusion to the problem of female energy posed in her work and, less happily, the result of the failure of her own imagination to create the sorts of alternatives Mill envisions. Middlemarch and its environs are a closed world whose survival depends on the continuing life of values cherished by the author. Her fidelity to these values, however, prevents George Eliot from arriving at a radical solution—or, indeed, any solution—to the problems of female energy the book proposes. She can only struggle to contain the energy, force the new wine back into the old bottles, as she does with Dorothea, or condemn its egotism as most hostile to the community she loves.

Only one small scene, Lydgate's memory of Madame Laure, points to the road George Eliot rejected. These passages, like no others in the book, leap from the page, demanding to be read symbolically. But as symbol of what? The traditional reading makes the scene reflect on Lydgate, showing us what he as yet can't see: that he would do well to stay unmarried. Obviously, too, Madame

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Laure herself reflects on Rosamond, a spiritual rather than a physical murderer. If, however, the general reading proposed here has any validity, if, that is, *Middlemarch* is significantly, even centrally, concerned with the problem that excess energy in combination with the world's conventions poses for George Eliot and her female characters, then certainly another reading is possible. When Madame Laure says, "You are a good young man. But I do not like husbands. I shall never have another." (114), she is speaking as a woman who has literally killed a man to gain her freedom. By underscoring the violence of Laure's energy, the ruthlessness of her power, George Eliot shows clearly what she is most afraid of if she leaves her female characters generally unbridled. But we can only wonder—and perhaps regret—that this image was not pursued further and in another direction, that George Eliot did not finally create a woman who knew before the fact that she neither liked nor needed husbands since such liking would force her either to submit or to destroy. Had George Eliot been able to find some system of values by which such a woman could live, she might have succeeded in breathing life again into Saint Theresa's dessicated image.

It is illegitimate, I know, to condemn an author for what she did not choose to do. But as I have moved away from what I now believe was merely an adolescent fantasy concerning the contents and implications of *Middlemarch* to what I hope is a more true understanding of the text's attitudes toward woman, I see that it can no longer be one of the books of my life. In so seeing, I am alternately angered, puzzled, and finally depressed. Madame Laure's history without her husband, the story of Dorothea as a social force, the tale of Rosamond as a political novel, none of these have been written. If we can imagine a world or a vision that might write them, then perhaps this condition is not final and, creating our own futures, we may be consoled.

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