MRS. (POLLY) LEWES'S COMIC *MIDDLEMARCH*

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Of the many possible ways of responding to *Middlemarch*, I would like to explore three reasons for seeing it not as the rather melancholy story proposed by the contemporary Anglican reviewer R. H. Hutton;[1] nor in Leavis's rather sombre interpretation in relation to her earlier realistic portraits of provincial life;[2] but as the novel of which her friend the feminist Barbara Bodichon wrote: "People say it is so witty amusing and lively . . . and call it light reading."[3] I shall refer to the book as Mrs. Polly Lewes's *Middlemarch* in the belief that the pretended male author has less importance than in the earlier work, that the portrait of Will Ladislaw is a tribute to George Henry Lewes, and that Will's sunny laughter is of central importance in a novel that is so varied in tone and so often feminist. It is in *Middlemarch* that we find the wit of Mary Garth and the only narrator that employs the full range of Mrs. Lewes's own characteristic tones of voice.

I could begin, as Jeannie Thomas does in her chapter *Making Room for the Comic Spirit*, by quoting examples of the "lighter sort of memorable phrasing" that we find in *Middlemarch* alongside those resonant passages of serious reflections in which she says "George Eliot seems most characteristically herself";[4] or I could allude, as Thomas and many of the early reviewers do, to some of the often funny minor characters; or I could refer to Rosemary Ashton's useful reminder about the importance of comedy of manners in *Middlemarch*.[5] But I wish to go further than this and explore the case for a reading of the novel that brings into play the full range of comic modes in the book, and in particular the sharpness of the narrator's wit with regard to the major characters. Jeannie Thomas says that "no reader in his or her right critical mind would describe Middlemarch as a great comic novel,"[6] and if we limit our definition of comedy to comic phrasing and funny characters she is probably right. But that is to ignore the fact that comedy in English literature has also been about happy endings, about the emergence from blindness about self, and about satire, to mention just a few traditional comic modes. She also forgets, as R. H. Hutton did not, that Mrs. Lewes could be very sarcastic and that her comedy could be savage. She even attempts to soften the savagery of the phrase "the Christian Carnivora" to describe the behaviour of the Featherstone relatives at Stoney Court; whereas a contemporary said of this scene:

> The death of old Featherstone is most powerful. She is wonderful in the faculty, when she has to be forcible, of getting at the right

word and phrase directly and without beating about the bush for stonger language. There is no hesitation or doubt when the blow has to be struck at the imagination.[7]

She also ignores Eliot's comments in *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* (October 1856) that a good novel "may take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements—genuine observation, humour and passion."[8] Rather than being incidental, comedy was to be an essential part of her art, as Charles Bray realised even when describing the tragic *Adam Bede* as "cram full of good sense & health, & wit & humour & good feeling & human nature—*No one* has done the like in my opinion in our age."[9]

If we turn to the major characters, at the start of the novel Casaubon is primarily a comic figure, whom we need to place within the conventions of English comedy from the time of Chaucer's January-May. That is, at first he is seen almost wholly from the outside as an egotistic elderly man, who has become totally inelastic in his understanding of others, and who is completely inadequate as the partner of the young and very naive Dorothea. Only much later on will we be asked to forget how impossible he is as a partner for her and to see the marriage momentarily from his point of view as a tragic failure. Dorothea herself is another typical heroine of English comedy. As with Jane Austen's Emma, the narrator delights in her despite her limited understanding of herself and of those around her, because her many good qualities mean that she is capable of growth. Dorothea's growth in self-knowledge may not be funny ha-ha, but it does belong firmly within one convention of English comedy. And so does the fate of Lydgate; for Lydgate fails to be a hero of romantic comedy, unlike Ladislaw. However much some readers may regret it, the narrator goes out of "his" way to state and to show that Lydgate is trapped by his comically provincial attitude towards women. Some modern readers may well think this is unfair; but that was not Mrs. Lewes's point of view. When Jeannie Thomas talks about the comic being "part of the endowment for living that George Eliot passes on to us,"[10] she is absolutely right, but part of that endowment demands that we should see the failure of the grander characters within the conventions of comedy rather than those of tragedy, even to the extent of asking ourselves whether Mrs. Lewes was not rather wicked to use some of the conventions of comedy in this way, for it does seem she uses them to go strongly against the male characters.

I shall now argue that in *Middlemarch* there is a curious bias against most of the main male characters. I shall then look at a few biographical reasons for this. Finally, I shall consider the mixture of comic modes used in Book One.

First of all, the delightfully wicked bias against the male characters. With the exception of the two youngsters Will and Fred, the main male

characters are rewarded with outrageous prizes for bad conduct, while the minor ones are treated as too humorous to be taken seriously. Casaubon, for example, though occasionally pleaded for on compassionate grounds is allowed to self-destruct after falling prey to manic jealousy. Farebrother is not only one of life's failures, but he is subjected to the anguish and dramatic irony of having to court Mary on Fred's behalf. Bulstrode's pretensions are destroyed by a comically presented Nemesis—in the form of the appropriately named Raffles, a master of torment. Even in the early chapters, where he is presented almost wholly dramatically, Bulstrode's overbearing manner is offset by the brilliance with which Mrs. Lewes mimicks his voice and idiom: "Mr. Farebrother, my dear sir, is a man deeply painful to contemplate" (126); by the hilarious pomposity of his attitude towards his lunch (of a glass of water and sandwiches), and by the humour of the author's description of his "deferential bending attitude in listening" (123). Mr. Brooke and Sir James Chettam are dealt with in a purely comic mode, for though they remain "friends of whom one does not soon weary of telling,"[11] the author's irony prevents us taking them throughout at their own estimation.

It is Lydgate who is subjected to the author's most searching moral scrutiny, and it is he whose spots of commonness are punished most savagely. Where Rosamond is seen mostly sympathetically as a product of her environment, particularly in relation to parental pressure and Mrs. Lemon's school—if life offers her a lemon, what can she do?—the presentation of Lydgate is only fleetingly lighthearted in the early chapters. The author's animus against the common pride of this young Paris figure is soon spelt out in pages of analysis of his faults as an individual. What we have, in fact, is a rather angry version of the old story of Paris and Aphrodite, when Aphrodite hoped to win the beauty contest by flattery and by promising Paris Helen, who would "abandon her home, her family, everything to become [his] mistress."[12] For some reason, Mrs. Lewes was wholly unwilling to leave the reader free to be charmed by this young Paris. The verdict is crushing from the start of Book II. Where Bulstrode will be shown wriggling on a pin only after the arrival of Raffles, Lydgate is first to be enslaved and then rewarded for his mistakes by being made to wriggle repeatedly under Rosamond's egoism. Outstanding as the portrait of their relationship is, is its power not in fact partly a result of the mythic simplicity of its outline? And should we not, in fact, see *Middlemarch* partly as a reversal of the Judgement of Paris with a woman narrator judging the three main male characters?

The outrageous irony of Lydgate's death by diphtheria is compounded by the unfairness of the prize for conduct that Rosamond achieves in the form of an elderly and wealthy physician. Nor is Rosamond the only lucky

woman. Celia, Mary and Dorothea also reap rich rewards: Celia gets an amiable and wealthy landowner and although Mrs. Lewes finds him amusing, she shows surprisingly little animus against him as an individual; the dreamy Mary gets a loving Fred and devoted Mr. Farebrother, and Dorothea is rescued from her living tomb with Casaubon by a passionate and mythic Will/Bacchus. She also wins the homage of the reader, of Lydgate (who eventually comes to appreciate "a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary" 768),[13] and of the author, whose portrait of her ironically and triumphantly gives her an immortality that belies her living only the "hidden life" of the novel's last line (838). After Casaubon's death, both her active support of Lydgate over the hospital and her relationship with Ladislaw will take her well beyond the fate of Amos Barton's wife: "A loving woman's world lies within the four walls of her own home; and it is only through her husband that she is in any electric communication with the world beyond."[14]

To understand fully how important it was for Mrs. Lewes to make Lydgate suffer as a result of his choice of Rosamond, we can compare his fate with with Amos Barton's; for in spite of all his failings, Amos is blessed in his choice of wife. The narrator even comments:

> You would not, perhaps, have anticipated that this bliss would fall to the share of precisely such a man as Amos Barton, whom you have already surmised not to have the refined sensibilities for which you might have imagined Mrs. Barton's qualities to be destined by pre-established harmony. But I, for one, do not grudge Amos Barton his sweet wife. I have all my life had a sympathy for mongrel ungainly dogs, who are nobody's pets.[15]

So why the grudge against Lydgate? Are there, in fact, not possible biographical reasons for the anti-male bias in the book? Or, if you don't like such a question, here is an alternative: surely Mrs. Lewes's decision to make Casaubon, Lydgate and Ladislaw into her main male characters is distinctly odd if her intention was simply to write a purely realistic study of provincial life? Surely, more appropriate main characters would have been Christy Caleb, Mr. Larcher, Mr. Tyke or Young Cranch? The prominence of Lydgate, Casaubon and Ladislaw makes more sense if we see them partly as vehicles for Mrs. Polly Lewes's coming to terms with her feelings about the three men who dominated her life in London: that is, if we see George Henry Lewes behind Ladislaw, Herbert Spencer behind Casaubon and Dr. John Chapman behind Lydgate. It should go without saying that there are endless differences between these, and any other possible originals, and the fictional characters. As Mrs. Lewes herself said with reference to *Adam Bede*, "there is not a single portrait . . . ; only the suggestions of experience wrought up into new combinations."[16]

There seems to be a direct reference to Chapman in Chapter 15 and to the mistress he had when Marian Evans arrived in London in 1850, whose name was Elisabeth Tilley. Mrs. Polly Lewes writes: Lydgate "was an emotional creature, with a flesh and blood sense of fellowship . . . He cared not only for 'cases,' but for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth" (145). John Chapman's attitude to physical beauty deeply upset the young Marian Evans at a time when she was deeply susceptible to her own lack of beauty. Surely, Lydgate's attitude to plain women like Mary Garth had its origin on the day that Chapman took Marian Evans to Leamington, when he dwelt "on the incomprehensible mystery and witchery of beauty," when his words "jarred upon her and put an end to her enjoyment, [making her weep] bitterly."[17] In 1857 Chapman was to become Dr. John Chapman, having finished a medical degree at St. Andrews'; and in 1864 after separating from his wife, he went on to establish himself in Paris, "specializing in functional and nervous diseases of women, which he treated with a spinal ice bag."[18] Already in July 1858 Mrs. Lewes was talking about him as a reader of *Middlemarch* might talk about Lydgate:

> Your portrait of poor Dr. Chapman is sadly graphic, and recalls to me what have often been my own impressions in meeting him during this last year. There is so much to respect and pity in him.[19]

Although he was to live until 1894, Mrs. Lewes often made references to his ill health in her letters. Chapman is also behind Antony Wybrow in *Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story*; and George Eliot even gave Caterina Sarti's rival for his love the name of Chapman's daughter Beatrice. As in the case of Lydgate, she even made Capatain Wybrow's poor health lead to his early death. One candidate for Casaubon is Dr. Brabant, because of a meeting between him and Marian Evans in 1843. But surely the meeting was more important for Miss Evans's adulation of a man to whom she felt she could dedicate her life (by helping with a great work) than for what it tells us about the doctor himself. (Dr. Brabant is probably a better candidate for "Monsieur Liret at Lausanne, also ugly and learned" [47]).

The most obvious living candidate for some aspects of Casaubon's personality was surely Herbert Spencer, whose importance in Marian Evans's life was eclipsed by Lewes, just as Casaubon's importance to Dorothea is slowly eclipsed by Will. The portrait of Casaubon begins by emphasising on the one hand his age, his integrity and his scholarly ambitions, and on the other, his lack of passion and total dedication to his work. His interest in women is shown as confined to that of a possible assistant to lighten his studies. Later on, the portrait shows him falling prey to bitter fault-finding of his professional rivals, morbid jealousy of his cousin Will and a terrifying egoism in his relationship with Dorothea. According to Ruby Redinger, by the time Herbert Spencer met Marian Evans, she had undergone an impor-

tant personality modulation: she was no longer the outwardly emotional woman that Chapman knew, nor the impetuous and uneven tempered teenager and young woman known to Midland friends. We now know from her letters to him from Broadstairs in 1852 that this isn't true of her until after they had agreed they couldn't possibly marry. Nevertheless, it does seem true that their later relationship was characterised by light gaiety and companionship between equals. Marian Evans described it to a friend as a "deliciously calm new friendship."[20] As Redinger suggests, Spencer probably feared sexual union and was eventually forced to realize that he was a confirmed bachelor. "It did not take her much time to realize that Spencer's work was to be his life" and that "his hypothetical wife would be either a listener secretary or a nurse housekeeper."[21] Rosemary Ashton usefully expands on the situation:

> In 1842 Spencer had his head examined by an English phrenologist, J. Q. Rumball, who pronounced his organ of Combativeness to be 'rather full,' his Love of Approbation large, his Self-esteem very large, but unfortunately his Wit and Amativeness only moderate. In confirmation of the diagnosis he had written to a friend in April 1851 that, at nearly thirty-one, he was still a bachelor and had 'pretty well given up the idea' of marriage.[22]

When Marian Evans went off with Lewes in 1854, Ruth Redinger argues, Spencer became intensely jealous, after which he suffered the first of a series of terribly debilitating nervous upsets, which were to plague him for most of his life. Spencer was also—like Casaubon—an obsessive fault-finder in his professional life.

Ladislaw's adoration of Dorothea, on the other hand, can be seen both as a tribute to Lewes and as a simple transcription of the kind of language Lewes himself used to describe his adoration of Miss Evans: "It was through [Spencer] that I learned to know Marian—and to know her was to love her—and since then my life has been a new birth."[23] Other aspects of Ladislaw's character that may also have been taken from Lewes are his foreigness, his versatility, his sparkle in company, his moments of aggression and his keen awareness of how volatile his temper is. Lewes himself referred to his "anxious and impatient temperament."[24] Nevertheless, it is perhaps unfortunate that Mrs. Lewes did not give Ladislaw more big scenes. Most readers never get to the point of falling for him, as Marian Evans eventually fell for Lewes: "We had a pleasant evening last Wednesday—Lewes, as always, genial and amusing. He has quite won my liking, in spite of myself."[25]

Frederick Karl makes some surprising comments about Dorothea's choice of Ladislaw and his of her being "virtually a brother-sister rather

than a husband-wife joining."[26] That is not how I would read the romantic vocabulary of the following:

> Underneath . . . there was always the deep longing which had really determined her to come to Lowick. The longing was to see Will Ladislaw. She did not know any good that could come of their meeting: she was helpless; her hands had been tied from making up to him for any unfairness in his lot. But her soul thirsted to see him. How could it be otherwise? If a princess in the days of enchantment had seen a four-footed creature coming from among those which live in herds come to her at once and again with a human gaze which rested upon her with choice and beseeching, what would she think of in her journeying, what would she look for when the herds passed her? Surely for the gaze which had found her, and which she would know again. Life would be no better than candle-light tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy. . . . Dorothea . . . counted on Will's coming to Lowick to see the Farebrother family. The very first Sunday, *before* she entered the church, she saw him as she had seen him the last time she was there, alone in the clergyman's pew; but *when* she entered his figure was gone. (539)

Then there is the passionate epigraph to Chapter 54 from Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, Sonnet xxi, which begins:

> Negli occhi porta la mia donna Amore;
> Per che si fa gentil cio' ch'ella mira:
> Ov'ella passa, ogni uom ver lei si gira,
> E cui saluta fa tremar lo core.

And what about the dramatic irony of Will thinking that Dorothea wants him to go away for years when she only says that to compliment him on his talents. Surely such passion and the irony of such misunderstandings are the very stuff of romantic fiction; though the Dante is a reminder that Will is no Stephen Guest? The drama and passion of such passages, and they are many, show how far Mrs. Polly Lewes's feelings were from the feminist critics of the 1970s and from Virginia Woolf's sad comments on Eliot's heroines: "Virginia Woolf saw them as ending in tragedy or 'in a compromise that is even more melancholy.' She means marriage to someone like Will."[27]

In these three portraits do we not have a spirited and confident summary of her feelings for the three most important men in her London life (with Chapman in third place as Tertius)? And if this is so, is it not appropriate that the novel is so subtly and consistently comic in tone, especially when compared with her other novels?

Incidentally, comic too was the atmosphere at the theatre on Miss Evans's thirty-second birthday on November 22, 1851 when she shared a box with all three of them, with Lewes helping "'to carry off the dolourness of the play' (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*) by a running commentary of irreverent remarks."[28] But it was not for many a year that she realised Lewes might be number one.

The first Book is the bubbliest in the novel and is crucial for setting the confidently detached tone of the whole book. Lewes greatly enjoyed his rereading of it: "being in a perpetual gurgle of laughter all the while"[29]; and John Blackwood commented: "I found myself pausing upon nearly every page to laugh and think over something equally happy in thought and expression. There is a perfect wealth of thought and fun and then it is real life."[30] In later Books most readers are moved by particular events—some of which come close to tragedy. Nevertheless, the various comic modes and narratorial quips are present throughout, even in moments of high drama, and either continue to encourage some comic detachment in the reader or invite a mixed response. Because it is so important in shaping our responses to the whole novel, I shall risk looking at the comedy in Book I in some detail and quote a number of examples of the narrator's lively and witty style. Frederick Karl conjures up a George Eliot who was "solemn about life,"[31] but of all the narrators in her books that of *Middlemarch* comes closest to the Polly Lewes of whom her "husband" commented on 22 September, 1871: "She is naturally of so strong a vitality" despite all her ill-health.[32] Even in the year of her death Bret Harte was to appreciate that humour was an essential part of her personality, her face expressing "elevation of thought, kindness, power and *humour*."[33] Fortunately, Rosemary Ashton's biography sets the record straight.

Book I starts with two beautiful, charming, well-bred and eminently marriageable sisters—both young ladies of fortune. As befits the opening of a comedy, the elder sister, while being presented as the obvious heroine, is also the more volatile and wilful, what Celia thinks of "as the dangerous part of the family machinery" (815). This is established with great wit by having the narrator introduce some of Dorothea's favourite expressions in the form of free direct speech:

> Dorothea knew many passages of Pascal's *Pensées* and of Jeremy Taylor by heart; and to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solicitudes of feminine fashion appear *an occupation for Bedlam* [my italics]. Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world *which might frankly include the parish of Tipton* and her rule of conduct there. . . . [my italics] (8)

Such extremely violent language are typical of Dorothea's youthful self-deception, as they are of Jane Austen's Emma. The glaring contradiction between Dorothea's religious pretensions about the need to suppress the self and her wilful desire to *rule* over Tipton—and later to make a little colony—were even more obvious to contemporaries than ourselves. Frederick Karl says that Dorothea is "truly daring . . . in her desire for social improvements (when she herself is comfortably placed among the elite)"[33]; but surely Sir James shares her concerns to makes improvements? And Dorothea's comment that "it would be as if the spirit of Oberlin had passed over the pastures to make the life of poverty beautiful" (32) is a reminder that the spirit of philanthropy that had started in the late eighteenth century was not part of revolutionary politics. The issue was an important one also in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice,* in which Elizabeth Bennett has to come to terms with the prospect of becoming mistress of Darcy's Pemberley, but Elizabeth is not compromised by Dorothea's evangelical pretensions. Nevertheless, as with Katherina at the start of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew,* the author and the reader are wholly sympathetic with Dorothea's plight, for according to the customs of this horrifyingly provincial society the ideal characteristics of a marriageable girl are "good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection" (8). This is one of the authorial comments that the contemporary male critic R. H. Hutton found unpleasantly sarcastic, and wished George Eliot had cut out.[34] Other readers may find the style at such points extremely witty not simply in the way it peppers information about the nature of local opinion with pithy epigrammatic comments, but also in the way it undermines Dorothea's aspirations with ironic comments:

> Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it. (10)
>
> And how should Dorothea not marry?—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions; but the safeguard of society and of domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them. (9)

The pithiness of the last comment makes an interesting comparison with the realistic but rather frightening tone of this advice of Mrs. Cadwallader's after Casaubon's death:

> You will certainly go mad in that house alone, my dear. You will see visions. We have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane,

> and call things by the same names as other people call them by. To be sure, for younger sons and women who have no money, it is a sort of provision to go mad: thay are taken care of then. But you must not run into that. I daresay you are a little bored here with our good dowager; but think what a bore you might become yourself to your fellow-creatures if you were always playing the tragedy queen and taking things sublimely. (537)

Incidentally, this advice adds immensely to our appreciation of Mrs. Cadwallader's idiom as capable of true wit as well as tending to the caustic.

The dinner party that follows in Chapter 2 brings together the first group of male characters, whom the author introduces with no less playful irony and feminist sharpness. Mr. Casaubon, for example, is either silent or shown speaking as if to a group of students—and even describes himself as living "too much with the dead" (18). It is clear that Dorothea's visions of Casaubon as a modern Augustine and winged messenger, with herself as his lamp holder assistant, are absurdly short-sighted. The tone, however, is consistently light: the dialogue brilliantly delineates and contrasts the different personalities, and the setting of eating and drinking is appropriate to comedy. Rather than try to find a political attack here on the gentry, "we are inclined to relish the social comedy," as Jeannie Thomas concludes, "in which all the characters are busy being their very eccentric, individual selves."[35]

This lightness continues into the next chapter. Possible alarm for Dorothea is dissipated by our enjoyment of Celia's point of view—and of the children who will later be closely associated with Will, as Bacchus and his followers:[36] "Celia, who did not like the company of Mr. Casaubon's moles and sallowness, had escaped to the vicarage to play with the curate's ill-shod but merry children" (24). And by the dryness of the narrator's tone: "[Casaubon's] face was often lit up by a smile like pale wintry sunshine" (26).

However, on occasion the narrator can be savage in her refusal to sentimentalize Dorothea's achievements, given the lack of opportunities for women at that time:

> What could she do, what ought she to do? . . . not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the niblings and judgments of a discursive mouse. With some endowment of stupidity and conceit, she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal of life in village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of *Female Scripture Characters,* and the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir. (28)

Dorothea is not portrayed as a entrepreneur like Mrs. Lewes's friend Edith Simcox, who ran a shirt-making factory where women were employed un-

der far better conditions than in other mills and factories in England. That possibility belonged to a later period, just as did Will's hope of winning "an honour position" in post-Reform Britain "without family or money." Frederick Karl wonders if the seed of Dorothea's interest in workers' cottages was not planted by Eliot's visit to Harriet Martineau's Cooperative Building Society in the Lake District.[37]

Sir Chettam's attempts to win Dorothea's love lead to a comic scene of misunderstanding a la *Pride and Prejudice* over an "objectionable" Maltese puppy; and Dorothea's prejudice against Sir Chettam even spills over into a Celia-like declaration of physical disgust: "his dimpled hands were quite disagreeable." Again it is interesting that throughout the scene the narrator's style is so varied and bubbly. Sir James's and Dorothea's personal idioms are perfectly mimicked in both dialogue and free indirect speech.

The news of Dorothea's engagement to Casaubon is not made public until after Celia has put her foot in it by commenting on Casaubon's soup slurping and blinking before he speaks. However, it is left to the narrator to make the most cutting remarks on Casaubon's style of courtship after he has addressed Dorothea like a public meeting:

> "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. Hitherto I have known few pleasures save of the severer kind: 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." No speech could have been more thoroughly honest in its intention: the frigid rhetoric at the end was as sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an amorous rook. . . . Dorothea's faith supplied all that Mr. Casaubon's words seemed to leave unsaid. (50)

The comedy continues as the provincial scene widens a little to bring in the delightfully comic Mrs. Cadwallader. Mr. Brooke winces on her arrival and she pitches in with her opinion of the *lively* Casaubon as "our Lowick Cicero" (53) and of Brooke as "a perfect Guy Faux" whom the locals will burn in effigy. When she hears of Dorothea's engagement, she is of course alarmed and off she scuttles to tell Sir James he has been jilted:

> "I knew there was a great deal of nonsense in her. . . . But these things wear out of girls. . . ."
>
> "Good God! It is horrible! He is no better than a mummy!" (The point of view has to be allowed for, as that of a blooming and disappointed rival.)
>
> "She says, he is a great soul. A great bladder for dried peas to rattle in!" said Mrs. Cadwallader.

"What business has an old bachelor like that to marry?" said Sir James.

"He has one foot in the grave."

"He means to draw it out again, I suppose." (58)

The brilliance of all this, and of what follows, depends partly on the reader's real pity for Dorothea as a young heroine in a romantic comedy despite her "air of being more religious than the rector and curate together" (61), but it also depends on the brisk pace of the narrative and the sharpness of the repartee.

This comic whirlwind of a chapter with Mrs. Cadwallader is followed by the author's further witty analysis of Casabaun's lack of passion:

> As in droughty regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, so Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge which his stream could afford him; and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion. . . . 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. . . . (63)

Again the potential seriousness of the situation (nicely captured by Barbara Bodichon's account of Dorothea as "a child dancing into a quick-sand on a sunny morning)"[38] is made to strike the reader less because it is soon overshadowed by the comedy of Mr. Brooke's outrageous anti-feminism and general foolishness on the one hand and his deep affection for his niece on the other hand.

After another comic scene at the Cadwalladers', there is Dorothea's visit to her future home. Celia's forebodings about the gloominess of the place are offset by the entry of the youngster Ladislaw wearing " a pouting air of discontent" (79). He is puzzled by Dorothea, and comically misunderstands her character completely. His reaction to the idea of her marriage to his cousin Casaubon provides yet another perspective on its inappropriateness, motivated as it is by no trace of bitterness:

> When their backs were turned, young Ladislaw sat down to go on with his sketching, and as he did so his face broke into an expression of amusement which increased as he went on drawing, till at last he threw back his head and laughed aloud. Mr. Will Ladislaw's sense of the ludicrous lit up his features very agreeably: it was the pure enjoyment of comicality, and had no mixture of sneering and self-exaltation. (80)

The reaction comes appropriately from an attractive lad, who is clearly shown to be a character with romantic potential. Teasingly, however, the author removes him from the scene: the hopelessly romantic reader's inter-

est in him will have to wait; though not before the author has indulgently commented on him with exuberant but loving irony:

> Genius, he held, is necessarily intolerant of fetters: he was not excessively fond of wine, but he had several times taken too much, simply as an experiment in that form of ecstasy; he had fasted till he was faint, and then supped on lobster; he had made himself ill with doses of opium. Nothing greatly original had resulted from these measures. (83)

The social scene widens much further at this point, with a lively evening gathering at the Vincys'. The male conversation focuses on styles of women, the female on doctors and the dryness of the future bridegroom. Mrs. Cadwallader hilariously combines the two topics with her remarks on Casaubon "as bad as the wrong physic—nasty to take, and sure to disagree" (91).

The focus of attention then passes briefly to Lydgate, in particular to his attitude to Dorothea and Rosamond. The presentation of his first appearance in the book is deceptively charming and comic. It comes in a conversation between Lady Chettam and Mrs. Cadwallader worthy of Oscar Wilde—Lady Chettam has just uttered her immortal opinion of Celia as a more suitable wife for Sir James: "she is fonder of geraniums, and seems more docile" (91). We then have the fun of: "James, bring Mr. Lydgate and introduce him to me. I want to test him" (91). But it is Mrs. Lewes who is judging him. The scene ends with Lydgate thinking of Dorothea: "She is a . . . fine girl, but a little too earnest. . . . It is troublesome to talk to such women" (93), and the narrator's ironic comment: "Lydgate . . . might possibly have experience before him which would modify his opinion as to the most excellent things in woman" (93).

The narrator is again ironic when after the description of Lydgate's admiration for Rosamond:

> "She is grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music." Plain women he regarded as he did the other severe facts of life, to be faced with philosophy and investigated by science. (94)

We have the comment:

> when a man has seen the woman whom he would have chosen if he had intended to marry speedily, his remaining a bachelor will usually depend on her resolution rather than on his. (94)

The tone, however, is kept light for the moment, by contrasting Rosamond with Dorothea:

> [Dorothea] did not look at things from the proper feminine angle. The society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form, instead of reclining in a para-

dise with sweet laughs for bird notes, and blue eyes for a heaven. (95)

Book I closes with two of the most famous comic scnes in the novel, both brilliant examples of the comedy of social manners. First, there is the repartee between Rosamond, Fred and their mother—"Brothers are so unpleasant" (98)—and Fred's "wheezy performance" (103) on a flute, "into which he threw much ambition and an irrepressible hopefulness"; and then there is Rosamond's arrival at the home of the old and wicked Featherstone for the purpose of bewitching Lydgate and fending off Mary Garth, a potential rival. We also meet Mrs. Waule in her black crepe ("How does she manage it, Rosy? Her friends can't always be dying" [105]). We witness Featherstone's twinkle and "one of his habitual grimaces, alternatively screwing and widening his mouth" (109). We see Rosamond's slim figure displayed: her riding habit "had delicate undulations" (112). (In such various ways we realize how witty Mrs. Lewes's observation of physical descriptions are—no less so than Dickens's.) We are told that "when she was in a good mood [Mary] had humour enough in her to laugh at herself" (113). Book I ends with the airy lightness of Rosamond's seeming triumph over Lydgate and her brother's irritation at having to solve his money problems with the testy Mr. Featherstone; while Fred's amusing rebuff to Rosamond about Mary ("How do you know what men would fall in love with? Girls never know" [120]) promises romantic development.

To finish, I will attempt a rapid summary of the comic modes used in *Middlemarch* as a whole. In Mr. Brooke and Mrs. Cadwallader we have examples of Hazlitt's fondness for comedy that cherishes rather than chastens the foibles of flamboyant individualism, and this was something very new in Mrs. Lewes's work. David Palmer discusses the difference in his introduction to *Comedy: Developments in Criticism,* which explores the different modes of comedy rather than trying to look for a single simple definition.[39] Jeannie Thomas's references to American critics who are impatient with some of the characters in *Middlemarch* for not being sufficiently American provide an invaluable reminder of how culture- bound some forms of comedy can be. Blackwood in particular was aware how important this would be for sales: "From the publisher's point of view, the excellence lay in the fact he would recognize so many of the types, especially 'the old twaddler Brooke.' But all characters, he says, stand out 'clear and distinct.'"[40] In particular, we do well to remember how important the reader's familiarity with specific types of behaviour can be. For many English readers Mrs. Lewes's ability to mimic mannerisms and idioms is highly pleasurable in itself, that is unless the reader has a particular political axe to grind. Palmer's expression about a kind of comedy that *cherishes* rather than *chastens* the foibles of flamboyant individualism nicely captures the difference. This difference is,

of course, especially important in *Middlemarch* as Mrs. Lewes deliberately chose to look back thirty years rather than to portray her own society; and in *Middlemarch* she did so with none of the nostalgia of *Silas Marner*.

In Casaubon we have Bergson's idea that comedy embodies society's suspicion of total "inelasticity" of character and mind,[41] which is similar to the Jonsonian idea of manic humours. The depth of our sudden involvement with Casaubon's terrible isolation in the later scenes depends largely on the comic inelasticity that keeps us at a distance earlier on. As Frederick Karl says, we should not underestimate the degree of mockery, ridicule and scorn that the narrator pours on Casaubon's attempts to create a key to all mythologies ealier on,[42] even though his description of Casaubon as a *demon* is over the top.

Then there is much use of situational comedy and dramatic irony: for example, in Celia's rude remarks to Dorothea about Casaubon's eating habits before she learns of the engagement, and in Lydgate's late arrival at the meeting to decide about the chaplain for the new hospital. A more touching example is when Farebrother goes to woo Mary Garth on Fred Vincy's behalf, when he himself is in love with Mary.

Next, there is satire on the vanity of human wishes. Starting with the ambiguous title, the book exposes all manifestations of provincial attitudes in Middlemarch itself and elsewhere—from the folly and snobbery of the Vincys' attitudes to education to Casaubon's ignorance of German scholarship and Mr. Brooke's unawareness of his meanness as a landlord. The mode, however, is satiric and not tragic: not for a moment are we allowed to wallow in how depressing and soul-destroying such an environment is.[43] Mrs. Lewes's publisher, John Blackwood, was rightly appreciative of how George Eliot used wit to relieve even the graver parts of the novel. In a letter to her about Book VIII, he gives two examples of this: first, the "little talk with Tantrip [sic] in 'the old tone'" when Tantripp comments on the tradition of widow's wearing black:[44] "and if anybody was to marry me flattering himself I should wear those hideous weepers two years for him, he'd be deceived by his own vanity" (789). And secondly, the narrator's comments at the start of Chapter 74 following Bulstrode's disgrace:

> when a woman with her thoughts much at leisure got them suddenly employed on something grievously disadvantageous to her neighbours, various moral impulses were called into play which tended to stimulate utterance. Candour was one. . . . Then, again, there was the love of truth—a wide phrase, but meaning in this relation, a lively objection to seeing a wife look happier than her husband's character warranted, or manifest too much satisfaction in her lot: the poor thing should have some hint given her that if she knew the truth she would have less complacency in her bonnet,

> and in light dishes for a supper-party. Stronger than all, there was the regard for a friend's moral improvement, sometimes called her soul, which was likely to be benefited by remarks tending to gloom, uttered with the accompaniment of pensive staring at the furniture and a manner implying that the speaker would not tell what was on her mind, from regard to the feelings of the hearer. On the whole, one might say that an ardent charity was at work setting the virtuous mind to make a neighbour unhappy for her good. (741)

We also have a neo-classical concern for "comic decorum,"[45] with the careful avoidance of "touching any man by name."[46] For even though I have suggested originals that might lie behind some of the characters, the narrator's tendency to generalise successfully engineers us into seeing ourselves reflected in the failings of even the most unpleasant characters. In this context, it is worth reminding ourselves that Eliot wished to avoid too much ridicule. In her essay on *Debasing the Moral Currency* in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), she is careful to warn of the dangers of too relentless a search for the ridiculous at the expense of ennobling emotions. While she admits:

> The world seems to me well supplied with what is genuinely ridiculous: wit and humour may play as harmlessly or beneficently round the changing facets of egoism, absurdity, and vice, as the sunshine over the rippling sea or the dewy meadows.

She also asks:

> Will fine wit, will exquisite humour prosper the more through this turning of all things indiscriminately into food for a gluttonous laughter, an idle craving without sense of flavours? On the contrary. That delightful power which La Bruyère points to—'le ridicule qui est quelque part, il faut l'y voir, l'en tirer avec grace et d'une manière qui plaise et qui instruise'—depends on a discrimination only compatible with the varied sensibilities which give sympathetic insight, and with the justice of perception which is another name for grave knowledge.[47]

She made a similar point about cynicism in a letter to John Blackwood in July 1857 with reference to the *Scenes of Clerical Life:*

> The moral effect of the stories of course depends on my power of seeing truly and feeling justly; and as I am not conscious of looking at things through the medium of cynicism or irreverence, I can't help hoping that there is no tendency in what I write to produce those miserable mental states.[48]

The satire blends in with the comedy of mannners. In fact, the book's portrayal of manners is less a study of provincial life as a whole than a

free-ranging comedy of the manners of particular individuals mainly within the higher social groups. The social groups below the Garths, and even the local doctors, are treated more as stock characters typical of 'low comedy' than rounded individuals. As mentioned earlier, the importance of this kind of comedy in the book has recently been re-emphasized by Rosemary Ashton, who makes the usual comparison with Jane Austen. As Ashton says in her biography: "George Eliot is unmatched in her extraordinary ability to render dialogue upon dialogue, sometimes witty, sometimes tense, sometimes painful, sometimes amusing to the reader but not to the participants."[49] Politically, the social comedy is perhaps at its sharpest in the portrayal of the way in which Sir James Chettam's circle act as a group of like-minded conservatives, who fearing Ladislaw's intelligence and ability as a journalist repeat references to him as "a foreign emissary," as though he were some kind of red under the bed (379-80). W. J. Harvey reminds us that the word emissary here has "a stronger, more pejorative sense than modern usage; it means a person sent on a mission to gain information or adherents to a cause, with connotations of this being an underhand activity."[50]

The portrayal of Raffles belongs to farce, as he keeps reappearing on the scene to Bulstrode's endless discomfort. His enjoyment of good food and drink also lends a touch of comic festivity to most of his main scenes.

Other important comic modes in the book are romantic comedy, tragi-comedy, and Shakespearean scenes of rebirth. The opening of Book I clearly owes much to romantic comedy, but so too does the general treatment of Fred Vincy and Will Ladislaw. The death of Casaubon, on the other hand, is tragi-comic, as it at last releases Dorothea from her terrible mistake. She is reborn through her relationship with Ladislaw, which ironically Casaubon has set in motion. The Finale to the book has a Shakespearean comic sadness, with its incomplete happy ending and emphasis on marriage and the birth of children.

I could go on to mention examples of parody in the book—of Dorothea as Ariadne, Cleopatra, Diana, Saint Theresa, and so on—and to emphasise further the narrator's enjoyment of a wide range of language which so distinguishes *Middlemarch* from Mrs. Lewes's earlier work. But I will end with two comments. First, although the Leweses' 'honeymoon' in Weimar and Berlin lasted eight happy months, they both really missed one thing . . . the English sense of humour.[51] It was not until she wrote *Middlemarch* (1869-72) that Mrs. Lewes fully realised the depths to which that humour could be put. Meanwhile, in January 1856 she had turned her experience of living in a culture without her own wit and humour into wickedly funny comments like these:

> German humour generally shows no sense of measure, no instinctive tact; it is either floundering and clumsy as the antics of a leviathan, or laborious and interminable as a Lapland day, in which one loses all hope that the stars and quiet will come. For this reason, Jean Paul, the greatest of German humorists, is unendurable to many readers, and frequently tiresome to all. Here, as elsewhere, the German shows the absence of that delicate perception, that sensbility to gradation, which is the essence of tact and taste, and the necessary concomitant of wit. . . . It is easy to see that this national deficiency in nicety of perception must have its effect on the national appreciation and exhibition of humour. You find in Germany ardent admirers of Shakespeare, who tell you that what they think admirable in him is his *Wortspiel*, his verbal quibbles; and one of these, a man of no slight culture and refinement, once cited to a friend of ours Proteus's joke in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—'Nod, I? why that's Noddy,' as a transcendent specimen of Shakspearian wit. German facetiousness is seldom comic to foreigners, and an Englishman with a swelled cheek might take up *Kladderadatsch*, the German *Punch*, without any danger of agitating his facial muscles.[52]

Secondly, let me quote the following remarks from *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879) that remind us so closely of Mrs. Lewes's description of Ladislaw's laughter ("it was the pure enjoyment of comicality, and had no mixture of sneering and self-exaltation"):

> if I laugh at you, O fellow men! if I trace with curious interest your labyrinthine self delusions, note the inconsistencies in your zealous adhesions, and smile at your helpless endeavours in a rashly chosen part, it is not that I feel myself aloof from you: the more intimately I seem to discern your weaknesses, the stronger to me is the proof that I share them.[53]

NOTES

All the references to *Middlemarch* are to the new Penguin edition (1994), edited by Rosemary Ashton and the references to the letters are to G. S. Haight (1954-55, 1978), *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols., New Haven, Yale University Press.

[1]R. H. Hutton, in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. D. Carroll (London: Routledge, 1971), 286-313. Hutton's response was immediately contested by a certain A. Creed (see *Letters*, V, 225).

[2]F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), chapter 2.

[3]G. S. Haight, *Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968), 446.

[4]J. Thomas, *Reading* Middlemarch: *Reclaiming the Middle Distance* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1987), 67.

[5]*Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), xxii.

[6]Thomas, 67.

[7]*Letters*, V, 254.

[8]Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1990), 162.

[9]Qtd. in Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), 216. Ashton gives an excellent description of how in *Adam Bede* George Eliot's use of a comic idiom in Mrs. Poyser's speech is not limited to just making her a very amusing sharp tongue. The same is true of Mrs. Cadwallader.

[10]Thomas, 67.

[11]Edith Simcox, qtd. in Carroll, 79.

[12]R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London: Penguin, 1955), 159.

[13]I find F. R. Leavis's attribution of this comment to George Eliot unfortunate. Surely, it is intended to be another example of Lydgate's "commonness" in his attitude towards women, no less so than his first thoughts about Dorothea in Book I?

[14]*Scenes of Clerical Life* (London: Penguin, 1973), 99-100

[15]*Scenes of Clerical Life*, 54-55.

[16]*Letters*, II, 503.

[17]Qtd. in R. Redinger, *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (London: The Bodley Head, 1976), 186.

[18]*Letters*, I, lxi.

[19]*Letters*, II, 472.

[20]Ashton, 91.

[21]Qtd. in Redinger, 215.

[22]Redinger, 218.

[23]Qtd. in Redinger, 231.

[24]*Letters*, V, 204.

[25]*Letters*, II, 94.

[26]F. Karl, *George Eliot: A Biography* (London: Flamingo, 1996), 474.

[27]Karl, 512n.

[28]Ashton, 94. Ashton also suggests very succintly why Lewes found Miss Evans so attractive: "Marian's intelligence, seriousness, and learning, leavened by a trenchant wit only in evidence when she felt confident and at ease" (106).

[29]*Letters*, V, 195.

[30]*Letters*, V, 199.

[31]Karl, 496.

[32]Karl, 618.

[33]Karl, 511.

[34]Hutton, 289.

[35]Thomas, 71.

[36]Frederick Karl says that Eliot does not do much with children in her later novels, but surely that makes Will's fondness for children more obviously significant. His relationship for *little* Miss Noble is another example of his natural charm with innocents.

[37]Karl, 154.

[38]Haight, 446.

[39]D. J. Palmer, *Comedy: Developments in Criticism* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 14. Eliot gives her own penetrating definitions of wit and humour, and of their origin in *German Wit: Heinrich Heine*; see Byatt and Warren, 69-72.

[40]*Letters*, V, 148.

[41]Palmer, 63.

[42]Karl, 493.

[43]Thomas, 68. John Hulcoop has a different point of view.

[44]*Letters*, V, 307. The old tone refers back to the treatment of Mrs. Poyser in *Adam Bede* and of the aunts in *Mill on the Floss*.

[45]Palmer, 12.

[46]Ashton quotes from *Hints on Snubbing*, one of the five sketches that Mary Ann Evans wrote for the *Coventry Herald* between December 1846 and February 1847, which she follows with a useful modern definition of comic decorum: "Such writing has the animus of personal experience of a painful sort transformed into generalized wit" (61).

[47]Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and N. Warren (London: Penguin, 1990), 439-40.

[48]*Letters*, II, 362.

[49]Ashton, 455.

[50]*Middlemarch*, ed. W. J. Harvey (London: Penguin, 1965), 905.

[51]J. Uglow, *George Eliot* (London: Virago, 1987), 55.

[52]Byatt and Warren, 73-74.

[53]Qtd. in Redinger, 214.