Women and Wills:

The Heroines of George Eliot's Middlemarch

by

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for my mother

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Abstract

Feminist critical discussion of George Eliot's novel Middlemarch focuses primarily on the heroine, Dorothea Brooke. By examining the structural and thematic relationships between Dorothea and two other prominent female characters, Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy, this thesis demonstrates how consideration of the roles of other women in the novel can enrich feminist interpretations of Dorothea and of the novel as a whole.

Dorothea strives not only to find a vocation and therefore the knowledge of how to achieve reforms, but also to understand her own desires. One of the major conflicts in the novel occurs within Dorothea as she tries to master her will. Dorothea's two marriages reveal her shift from renunciation to celebration of passion. The gender roles that develop in Rosamond and Mary's marriages illustrate authorial rejections of patriarchal constructions of gender, constructions which Dorothea must overcome in her struggle to control her will.

A brief introduction contextualizes the structure and interconnectedness of the novel to demonstrate why characters in the novel should not be interpreted in isolation. In the first chapter I discuss the feminist dialogue on Dorothea and assess the limitations of existing interpretations of her character. Feminist critics disagree about how Eliot represents Dorothea in her relationship to Will and whether their marriage constitutes Dorothea's failure as a heroine. I explore the theme of vocation and its relationship to passion and marriage in Dorothea's inner conflict. The second and third chapters address the characters of Rosamond and Mary, respectively. These chapters outline the structural parallels Rosamond and Mary share with Dorothea and explore the gender roles that their marriages reveal, the Victorian concept of the "angel in the house," evocations of sympathy for the female characters, and rejection of patriarchy. I conclude with a summary of how multiple meanings of the word "will" reflect the varying perspectives that each of these women provides.

CONTENTS

Short Titles

VD: Barrett, Dorothea. Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines. London; New York: Routledge, 1989.

GE: Beer, Gillian. George Eliot. Brighton, Sussex: Harverster Press, 1986.

MWQ: Blake, Kathleen. "Middlemarch and the Woman Question." Nineteenth-Century Fiction 31 (1976): 285-312.

WEM: Edwards, Lee. "Women, Energy and Middlemarch." Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature, the Arts and Public Affairs 13 (1972): 223-38.

M: Eliot, George. Middlemarch. 1871-2. London; New York; Victoria, Australia; Ontario, Canada; New Zealand: Penguin, 1994.

LW: Moers, Ellen. Literary Women. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976.

MG: Waddle, Keith A. "Mary Garth, the Wollstonecraftian Feminist of Middlemarch." George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies 28-29 (1995): 16-29.

Introduction

The human relationships Middlemarch brings to life are at once inextricably intertwined and fundamentally divided. The subtitle of the novel proclaims, "A Study of Provincial Life," promising a realistic portrayal of the complex interactions that take place within and among every level of society in the town of Middlemarch. The Prelude in turn raises different expectations of the novel by focusing on the idealistic struggles of an individual woman against an uncompromising community. Tensions between the individual and society and between idealism and reality, therefore, arise in the introductory pages.

Some of the tensions result from Eliot's combination of two different projects as she developed her ideas for the writing of Middlemarch. Eliot combined a short story called "Miss Brooke" with her ideas for the novel, and many critics complain that the beginning of Middlemarch misleadingly focuses exclusively on the character Dorothea Brooke. The critic Harriet Farwell Adams observes that "[f]ew changes...were made in the manuscript of "Miss Brooke" to adapt it for use as the opening of Middlemarch," concluding that as a result the Prelude and most of Book One represent "the beginning of a story that was quite certainly intended to develop in a different direction" (71). This view of the novel begins to illuminate the difficulties of discussing Dorothea's character alongside the more minor characters of Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy, whose parallel story lines rarely intersect.

Yet, as Bert Hornback asserts, in this novel "meaning grows out of the relationships--or lack of relationships--which it develops" (120). The connections

Dorothea has to Mary and Rosamond exemplify the ways in which no character's story can be isolated from other characters' stories when interpreting the novel, just as at the level of plot no character is isolated from the community. Many of the important relationships in Middlemarch develop within the framework of marriage, which provides a means of examining gender roles and presents a backdrop for comparing the women. While several other characters' gender relationships add to the overall representation of marriage in the novel, I focus solely on Dorothea, Rosamond and Mary because they are the three whose love relationships the reader witnesses unfolding and progressing.

Dorothea, Rosamond and Mary occupy positions separated by class both in the town and in the novel. Dorothea belongs to the landowning class, Rosamond to the manufacturing middle class, and Mary to the lower working class. While ostensibly representing a hierarchy with the highest class afforded the greatest importance in the narrative and the lowest class the least, the three women together reveal how different social and economic circumstances affect women and marriage. Ultimately all three do marry, a testament to the expectations placed on women regardless of class in a provincial 1830s town.

Dorothea's character enjoys the most prominence of the three women in the novel, thus incurring the most attention from feminist critics. The relative lack of criticism, feminist or otherwise, on Rosamond and Mary indicates a problem in feminist criticism, and the criticism that does exist is telling. Debating the implications of success or failure in Dorothea's marriages but dismissing the issues raised by the other two women's roles in marriage misrepresents the portrayal of

marriage in the novel. By examining Rosamond and Mary alongside Dorothea and including them in the feminist discourse of the novel, I aim to redirect ideas about feminine success and failure in marriage, thereby broadening feminist discussion of both Dorothea and the novel as a whole.

Chapter One discusses the existing feminist criticism on Dorothea. It begins with an examination of the importance of the heroine in feminist literary discourses. Historically, feminists have regarded the heroine of a novel and her actions as a model for female readers. In other words, the heroine should set a good example. Feminist critics are dissatisfied with Dorothea as a heroine because of her marriage to Will Ladislaw.

One of the central issues of feminist criticisms of the novel, the "St. Theresa-Complex," refers to the tension between Dorothea's lofty ideals of reform and the options available to her. The Prelude and Finale of the novel highlight the historical figure of St. Theresa and her ideals, establishing a parallel between St. Theresa and Dorothea. Many feminists see this tension as the main theme of the novel and concentrate their discussions of the "St. Theresa-Complex" on Dorothea's marriage to Will at the end of the novel. Feminists are disappointed with Dorothea's second marriage because they characterize it as an authorial reinforcement of the limitations imposed on women by society. Lee Edwards and Ellen Moers are among feminists who argue that Dorothea should be able to achieve greatness and find fulfillment outside the institution of marriage(WEM, LW). They claim that Middlemarch is not a feminist novel because Dorothea fails to follow in St. Theresa's footsteps.

Other feminists, despite their conviction that Dorothea's marriage to Will is a compromise, turn to the historical setting of the novel and recognize that Dorothea's options within her society are limited. In particular, Kathleen Blake and Dorothea Barrett examine the ways in which the heroine's energy as discussed by Edwards is linked to passion and vocation (MWQ, VD).

Dorothea's search for knowledge and vocation ends not only in marriage but in an affirmation of the passions that she denies and renounces throughout the novel. Her marriages to Casaubon and Will reflect the two extremes of her struggle--pious martyrdom and sensual passion. While feminists lament Dorothea's outward failure to bring about reforms, they overlook Dorothea's inner reformation of her will as she rejects the patriarchal knowledge imposed on her by Casaubon and learns to embrace her passions. This chapter establishes a foundation on which to introduce Mary and Rosamond into the feminist critical discussions about Dorothea and the relevant issues surrounding her character.

Chapter Two concentrates on Rosamond Vincy's character, initially on her structural connections to Dorothea and their similar roles in marriage. Rosamond is often seen as a foil to Dorothea, an image of selfishness to contrast with Dorothea's endless selflessness. Rosamond's marriage to Lydgate is almost a role reversal of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon; Lydgate is more of a parallel than Rosamond to the character of Dorothea. Both Lydgate and Dorothea have ideals that are stifled by marriage and societal constrictions. Yet despite Rosamond's alienating character traits on the surface, Eliot encourages the reader to sympathize with the circumstances that shape Rosamond's attitude and determine her unhappy condition,

as Russell Goldfarb argues in "Rosamond Vincy of Middlemarch." The similar sympathies Eliot evokes for both Dorothea and Rosamond illustrate the affinities between their similarly disappointed ideals of marriage.

Dorothea and Rosamond both have strong wills and even stronger resolve, but Rosamond's will presents no difficulties for her. Dorothea's will, on the other hand, is divided. Their strong wills reverse the literary and social Victorian stereotype of the "angel in the house." Rosamond's conformity to the stereotype to the point of parody proves destructive to Lydgate. Dorothea's divided will reveals an effort to repress her passion in order to function in a society that upholds an "angel" as an ideal. Through the eventual recognition of her romantic passion and satisfaction of her desire, Dorothea abandons the self-sacrifice and renunciation that makes her destructive like Rosamond.

Chapter Three focuses on the character of Mary Garth and the meanings that emerge from the structural parallels between Dorothea and Mary. Their characters are isolated from one another within the plot since the two never actually meet, but the connections between them cannot be ignored. Dorothea suffers through an oppressive first marriage to Casaubon, a sick older man, before his death releases her. Similarly, Mary is employed as a nurse to old Mr. Featherstone at the beginning of the novel. Mary's attendance on Mr. Featherstone acts as a metaphorical marriage within the text to foreshadow Casaubon's death and to link Mary's situation to Dorothea's. Mary's rejection of Featherstone's assertion of patriarchal law epitomizes her resistance of traditional male power, illustrating just how unconventional her character can be.

They both unintentionally prevent their future husbands from benefiting from the old men's wills. Mary and Dorothea's later marriages to Fred and Will, respectively, are an even stronger tie between the two characters. Both men are in need of direction and are saved from lives of idleness by their wives. That feminists are disappointed in Dorothea's "saving" Will through marriage but indifferent toward Mary's similar position indicates a double standard about women within the feminist discourse.

The differences between Dorothea and Mary account for the lack of attention feminists pay to Mary's character: Dorothea's ideals of reform extend into the public realm while Mary's remain from the beginning in the private realm of marriage. Mary's selfless principles resemble Dorothea's, but feminists devalue them because they do not supercede marriage. At the same time, critics (not just feminist critics) consider the Garths, including Mary, the moral center of the novel. Deirdre David's illumination of the role of the intellectual woman contributes to the angel in the house discussion. The idea of the extraordinary woman versus the ordinary woman and the expectations placed on each is central to the different feminist treatments of the two characters.

Chapter One

"Dorothea's Will: Compromise and Reformation"

Dorothea's fate in Middlemarch has been a point of contention among feminist critics because of her representation as a heroine. Whether her character and her actions promote the ideals of feminism has been a major factor in feminist critics' evaluation of the novel as a whole, and marriage has been at the center of the debate. Some claim that Middlemarch cannot be a feminist novel because Dorothea's character is weak and because she submits to the convention of marriage. Other critics are disappointed with the outcome of Dorothea's struggles, including her marriage, but look to other factors in the portrayal of her character in their contention that Middlemarch is indeed a feminist novel. Yet feminist critics rarely focus on female characters other than Dorothea. Despite disagreements about her character, feminist critics' discussions of the novel nonetheless center on Dorothea and the themes that surround her.

Ideals of marriage have changed along with the evolution of feminist literary theory. In the 1920s to '40s, Virginia Woolf wrote feminist and literary essays that have influenced virtually every feminist since. A pioneer in modern women's fiction, her heroines for the most part remain unmarried, a status not afforded most prior heroines, including Eliot's[1]. Later feminists of the 1960s and '70s asserted the standard inherent in Woolf's literary precedent, rejecting heroines who marry as the

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1. See Hermione Lee, The Novels of Virginia Woolf (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1977), and Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996).

feminists themselves pursued the political ideology of the moment[2]. Today marriage per se does not pose the same problems for feminism. Feminists who write about Eliot are mostly producing biographies or examining ideologies of community, especially communities of women. Whether marriage itself remains relevant to contemporary feminists, the gender relations it reveals are still illuminating. Evaluating the heroine out of context of her relationships to both men and women in the novel inadequately represents her character. The novel's relevance today should lie not in the actual facts of Dorothea's marriages, but what they reveal about her character. Ruth Yeazell recognizes the one-sidedness of her contemporary feminists' interpretations of Dorothea's marriage to Will: "the fictional event is also a metaphor; and to allow displeasure with the vehicle of that metaphor to obscure its tenor is to prove both false to the text and to ourselves" (34).The same holds true for Rosamond and Mary and their marriages.

The importance of the figure of the heroine to Woolf and the feminist critics of the '60s and '70s lies in the connection between a female author and how she chooses to represent women[3]. Because women had historically been denied access to writing literature, through lack of education and leisure time, when they finally did start writing in the late eighteenth century they could begin to create heroines who

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2. From a conversation with Anne Herrmann, 12 January 2000.
3. Eliot's own feminism comes into question as feminists comapre Dorothea's path in life to Eliot's own life. Some criticize Eliot for not allowing Dorothea to lead a nontraditional lifestyle as she herself did, and others argue that Dorothea does not have the same opportunities that Eliot had. Eliot did not take a political stand on the "Woman Question," so feminists debate about the role that writing played in Eliot's efforts to improve the situation of women. See WEM 236; MWQ 287; VD 175-81; Uglow 65-81; Paxton; Ringler; and Austen.

differed from men's portrayals of women in literature throughout history (LW 125). Gilbert and Gubar discuss male literary power, out of which they see emerging a "distinctly female literary tradition" in the nineteenth century (*xi*). They consider reforming how women are represented in literature as the woman writer's responsibility: "a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of 'angel' and 'monster' which male authors have generated for her" (17). Ellen Moers defines literary feminism through its portrayal of women: "'In delineating the Heroine of this Fiction, the Author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed'" (123). Indeed, she calls literary feminism "heroinism," clearly placing immense importance on the female protagonist (LW 122)[4].

Feminist disagreement about Dorothea revolves around the conflict set up in the Prelude and Finale between Dorothea's ideals of reform and the options that the town of Middlemarch makes available to her. Referred to by critics as the Saint-Theresa Complex[5], the conflict is described by Ellin Ringler as a problem of "desiring an epic life but finding no outlet for achievement apart from the socially limiting role of 'common womanhood'" (57). The Prelude tells the story of Saint Theresa's ideals of religious reform and her founding of a religious order. Theresa's success

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4. Lee Edwards bases her evaluation of the feminist merit of the novel almost completely on the heroine. Her claim that 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" is reinforced by her approach to the novel (WEM 223). Edwards identifies on a personal level with Dorothea's imaginative life: "Like Dorothea, I was a cygnet among ducklings" (WEM 230).
5. Laurence Lerner first named this conflict the "Theresa-complex" in his essay "Dorothea and the Theresa-Complex." See Swinden 225-47.

foreshadows Dorothea's failure: "[m]any Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action" (M 3). The narrator makes it clear, however, that the failures of women like Dorothea are due to the societies in which they live, claiming that "these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (M 3). The use of the word "ardent," an adjective repeatedly used to describe Dorothea throughout the novel, draws a distinct correlation between Dorothea and Theresa.

Moers praises the literary feminism (heroinism) of the Prelude to Middlemarch because of the focus on Saint Theresa, a female role model. In her interpretation, "Eliot seized on an episode of the saint's legend of particular meaning to her own feminine self-awareness" (LW 124). The promise of a "heroine as leader and reformer" fits Moers' idea of heroinism, but she is disappointed that, in her estimation, Eliot "hardly made such a figure out of Dorothea Brooke" (124). She observes that Eliot sets up a standard in the Prelude of which she ultimately makes Dorothea fall short. Because Dorothea never becomes the reformer alluded to in the Prelude, she fails as a heroine according to Moers' standards.

What kind of reform Dorothea could have achieved, however, remains a mystery. The parallel with Saint Theresa implies religious reform, and as Dorothea Barrett notes, "she has grown up in an environment in which religion is the only outlet for both passion and intellect in a young woman" (127). But even so, Dorothea's goals for reform are vague. The only way she can attain religious reform is through her early marriage to Casaubon, by devoting herself to his academic work

on the "Key to All Mythologies," his research on religion. Dorothea's first marriage is an early implication that marriage is the only possible vocation for women in her society, but initially Dorothea cannot perceive her mistake in marrying a man for access to his vocation rather than for passion or genuine affection for him. Dorothea "does not become a 'great woman' as greatness is measured by the world," according to Gillian Beer, but Eliot critiques so many institutions and assumptions in the novel that are endorsed by "the world," such as maternity and the maternal instinct[6], marriage, education[7] and inheritance[8], that standards of outward success should not be automatically excluded from the long list of societal standards that she criticizes (151).

Instead of bringing about wide-reaching reforms, Dorothea accomplishes something much more difficult: she reforms herself. Her first marriage enables her to overcome the "shortsightedness" of which Celia accuses her, and gradually she comes to understand her own passions. Woolf views Dorothea's search for religion and her ultimate failure as a paradigm that applies to all of Eliot's heroines: "Save for the supreme courage of their endeavor, the struggle ends, for her heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy" (Woolf "Eliot" 171). Nevertheless she warns readers against "dismiss[ing] the heroines without sympathy," since it is their searches and struggles that matter and not the outcomes (Woolf "Eliot" 170).

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6. See Paxton 177, 185-189.
7. See Springer 142-3; GE 161-2, 171; MG 25; and Ringler 59.
8. See GE 194.

Dorothea's first marriage is a necessary stepping-stone in her progression of self-awareness, but her second marriage, as the conclusion to the novel, is another matter. Feminist critics of the '60s and '70s agree with Woolf that Dorothea's marriage to Will Ladislaw at the end of the novel is a compromise. Reactions vary from the opinion that Dorothea is sacrificed to the conventions of society and marriage, to the opinion that her union with Will represents a necessary compromise. Feminists reject the critical interpretation that Dorothea's marriage to Will, because it is an improvement on her first marriage, presents a solution. Though feminists are dissatisfied with her second marriage, they agree on this point for different reasons.

While respecting the seriousness with which Eliot treats the subject of marriage in Middlemarch, comparing her to Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell, Moers criticizes the way Eliot portrays Dorothea in her marriage to Will. She feels that one cannot "believe in Dorothea's reformation at the end" (presumably referring to a change of awareness occurring within Dorothea), and she sees that as preventing Middlemarch from being "a thoroughgoing triumph of women's realism" (LW 72)[9]. Her ridicule of the "'sobbing childlike way'" Dorothea speaks to Will about their marriage is representative of the way she interprets Dorothea's character as a whole (LW 72). The social constraints that Dorothea suffers do not factor into Moers' interpretation; Dorothea's own character traits are cause for complaint[10]. Her view is

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9. For an alternate argument, see Paxton 196.
10. Moers also famously posits that "Dorothea...is good for nothing *but* to be admired" and that she is "[a]n arrogant, selfish, spoiled, rich beauty [who] does little but harm in the novel" (LW 194). See also WEM 234 and Ringler 56.

that Eliot created a heroine who wasn't capable of being a leader and reformer, and that that incapability is reflected in her marriage.

The child images of Dorothea and Will at their final, emotional meeting at Lowick reveal an important shift in gender dynamics. Connotations of childish naivete may be paradoxical at the climax of Dorothea's discovery of passion, but at least the two are on equal footing in terms of power in the relationship. Before her marriage to Casaubon, Dorothea describes to her uncle what she seeks in a husband: "I should not wish to have a husband very near my own age…I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgement and in all knowledge" (M 40). Her desire for a father-daughter or teacher-student hierarchical relationship compounds her general preconception of wifely submissiveness. In reply to her uncle's warning that "a husband likes to be master," Dorothea claims: "I know that I must expect trials…marriage is a state of higher duties. I never thought of it as mere personal ease" (M 41).

The narrator describes Dorothea's ideal marriage as one "where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you Hebrew, if you wished it" (M 10). The last phrase, "if you wished it," contains in a subtle reminder that Dorothea reserves room in the hierarchical marriage for her own desires, while the narrator at the same time puts her desires into question. Dorothea obviously does wish it, and since her dreams about marriage appear radically out of place in her society, the question arises: why does she wish it? Dorothea chooses "voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path" in order to escape "her girlish subjection to her own

ignorance" (M 29). She thinks of her marriage: "I should learn everything then...And then I should know what to do, when I got older" (M 29).

Although her enthusiasm is "lit chiefly by its own fire," she suffers from the misconception that knowledge or wisdom can reveal to her how to achieve these elusive reforms, and even reveal what the reforms will be, more specifically than her theoretical "doing good" (M 29).

Dorothea's love of giving things up, from renouncing small pleasures to her desire for martyrdom, chronicles her quest for the knowledge of how to make the world a better place. The critic Dorothea Barrett notes that she "vacillates between extremes. She will either wear no jewellery at all, and distinctly condescend to the desire to wear jewellery, or she will choose something outlandishly exotic" (126). Barrett parallels the choice of emeralds with Dorothea's choice of Will, whose light imagery is repeatedly described as glittering. Celia recognizes the double standard of Dorothea's choice of the emeralds: "either she should have taken her full share of the jewels, or, after what she had said, she should have renounced them altogether" (M 14). Dorothea's justification of both the jewels and her renunciation of horseback riding by "'merging them in her mystic religious joy,'" according to Barrett, foreshadows Dorothea's later claim about Will that "'If I love him too much it is because he has been used so ill'" (126)[11]. Dorothea does indeed vacillate between extremes in her choices of Casaubon and Will, and even in her attitudes about

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11. See also GE 188.

marriage, vowing first never to remarry and then becoming engaged to the one man of whom everyone else disapproves.

The act of renunciation in itself represents a vacillation between extremes. It encompasses both pain and pleasure, the pain of giving up something dear mixed with the pleasure derived from the satisfaction of renouncing[12]. The self-denial of renunciation, however, requires a certain amount of repression. Dorothea's renunciation of horseback riding represents, according to Barrett, "a conflict between extreme passion and extreme repression" (127). The same conflict is present in her choice of a first husband; in her marriage to Casaubon, Dorothea must repress romantic or erotic feelings she has for Will. Even after Casaubon's death Dorothea does not recognize her passionate feelings for Will and tries to deny them.

Asserting that throughout the novel Dorothea's "wish for freedom is always checked by her equally strong desire to submit," Lee Edwards sees Dorothea's marriage to Will as the ultimate submission (234). Edwards' wish for a fuller description of Will's reforms and the ways in which Dorothea helps him in his reform culminates in her often-quoted statement: "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" (235). Female energy is in Edwards' opinion the biggest sacrifice brought about by Dorothea's marriage. She complains that "George Eliot did not finally create a woman who knew before the fact that she neither liked

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12. See P. Beer 180.

nor needed husbands since such liking would force her either to submit or to destroy" (WEM 238).

The reasons for Edwards' dissatisfaction with the marriage stem from the feminist ideal that the author must deviate from the conventional ways of portraying female characters in creating the heroine. Edwards' major complaint is that Eliot "sacrifices energy and personality to place and to the conservative necessities which place dictates" (231). Evidently recognizing the historical aspect of the novel, she acknowledges that Middlemarch is not conducive to Dorothea's achievement of her goals, but she sees the constraints as an unnecessary sacrifice. Edwards laments that instead of creating "a world whose shadowy existence we have long suspected, but whose reality has been perpetually denied," Eliot depicts a history in which the energy and potential for great deeds "would be defeated or, at best, deflected" (232). In other words, Edwards wants Eliot to create a reality that never really existed.

Kathleen Blake stresses the historicism of the novel, disagreeing that the heroine must be a role model: "George Eliot does not show her heroine summoned to sweet ascent, but surely to supply such a satisfactory summons would be to endanger realism" (310) [13]. The practical reason Blake gives for why women's energies are fruitless in Middlemarch is that men are the only vocation available to women. She argues that "when women fulfill their need for vocation through men, they do so through their effect on the men, not through the men's independent achievements" (MWQ 303). Throughout Eliot's fiction, Barrett explores the relationship that

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13. See also GE 162.

vocation has to passion and desire: "[i]n George Eliot's characters, love and work are equal expressions of one personality...Dorothea is both sexually and vocationally passionate; she is sacrificing the former passion for the latter" (128)[14]. Dorothea's sacrifice of passion in favor of vocation takes place in her first marriage, but in her marriage to Will that does not hold true.

For Blake, the theme is one that applies primarily to Dorothea because "her energy...is greater than anyone else's in the book" (294). She ultimately points toward "social conditions, those which favored Saint Theresa but do not favor Dorothea," as the reasons for the failure of Dorothea's energy to make a difference because "energy is not expected of a woman" in the town of Middlemarch (MWQ 288, 294). Blake considers vocation the main theme of the novel, specifically "lack of vocation as tenuousness of identity" (289). Dorothea's frustrated energies lead to a sense of indefiniteness because she is unable to find a vocation as an outlet for her energy. First Dorothea is cramped by the limited options available to her, and then when she rejects those options she suffers from the vagueness of her ideals. Therefore what other critics view as weaknesses in Dorothea's character, Blake explains are the results of a diffusion of her energy due to a lack of vocation, not an internal shortcoming.

Sr. Jane Marie Luecke characterizes the historical setting as "a post-Calvinistic, post-enlightenment, post-God world" which, combined with inadequate

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14. Hilary Fraser also links passion and vocation, elucidating the connections between the portrayals in artwork of Saint Theresa's passion with the subtle references to Dorothea's sexual passion for Will in the novel.

education, necessitates the tension "between what is logically acknowledged and what is psychologically felt as being opposed to it" (60). Acknowledging the evident efforts of the author to accurately portray an 1830s provincial town to the fullest possible extent, Luecke maintains that Eliot's "vision of the nineteenth-century provincial society as it affects a highly intelligent and ardent young woman is traced accurately only because of the author's intuitive demand for a deficient and unsatisfying Ladislaw" (64)[15]. She contends that the immaturity and pettiness that characterizes Will through the comments of characters who are sincere as well as critical reflect that "Middlemarch is a decidedly imperfect society, one which makes impossible the achievement of greatness" (56). Other images associated with Will, overly complementary and even idealistic, such as "space and light and water, in order to contrast with the 'rayless,' 'dried up,' tomblike Casaubon" reflect the ways in which Dorothea sees Will (Luecke 61). Ultimately Will must be a lesser person than Dorothea because otherwise "she might have had no outlet if her husband was able to stand on his own strength" (Luecke 63).

Agreeing that Will is an inadequate match for Dorothea, Blake argues that feminists should not be disappointed in the marriage. She affirms Luecke's assertion that Dorothea's energies are "channeled to a practical use through him," and Will must be a weak husband in order for that to happen (Luecke 63). The passage of the second Reform Bill, toward which Will works with Dorothea's assistance, is for Blake evidence that Dorothea's energies are not completely sacrificed. Blake concludes, "While the reader's hopefulness in response to the end of Middlemarch

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15. See also P. Beer 207 and MWQ 306-10.

should be somewhat dashed in Will Ladislaw, it should take some heart in Reform" (309).

Justifiably, Edwards points out that the information about the Reform that appears in the Finale is too little and too late to be a satisfactory resolution of Dorothea's energy (235). Dorothea still only gives "wifely help," defining her vocation through her husband (M 836). Both sympathetic and unsympathetic feminist critics alike address this issue of Dorothea's energy. Part of the problem of Dorothea's wasted energy lies in the narrator's treatment of Dorothea. The ironic tone the narrator uses when referring to Dorothea, especially about her shortsightedness and her self-sacrifice, is commonly recognized by critics. Edwards, however, reads that same irony in the Saint Theresa-Complex in the Prelude and Finale. Concluding that Eliot "both pities and gently mocks Dorothea," Edwards asserts that Eliot, even from the beginning, never takes Dorothea's aspirations seriously[16]. If this is true, it is because the Reform Bill is an allusion to Dorothea's own inner reform.

Dorothea's reformation of will and discovery of sexual passion is of central importance to understanding Dorothea as a heroine. Not only does Dorothea struggle against a society that allows no outlet for her energies and ideals of reform, as exemplified by the Saint Theresa-Complex, but she also undergoes an inner struggle to understand her own feelings in such an uncompromising community. Before Dorothea's second marriage can be readily dismissed as a compromise, however, her

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16. Alternately, Dorothea Barrett claims that the disparity between the non-ironic tone of the Prelude and the ironic tone of Book One is intentional. Explaining the technique of systole and diastole, Barrett argues that the juxtaposition allows for criticism of Dorothea while maintaining the overall integrity of her character (125).

first marriage must be considered more closely. Dorothea and Rosamond share similar experiences in marriage that illuminate the destructiveness of Victorian ideals of marriage. The next chapter compares Dorothea's strong will with Rosamond's, exploring the limited space that exists in the marriage ideology for a woman with energy and a will of her own.

Chapter Two

"Rosamond Vincy: A Strong and Selfish Will"

Many aspects of Dorothea's idealism bear resemblance to the marital and professional ideals of Tertius Lydgate. Their paralleled aspirations of bringing about great reforms illustrate Eliot's capacity for transcending gender boundaries as well as revealing the deplorable lack of vocational opportunities for women. Dorothea and Lydgate both arrive in Middlemarch with plans for improving the lives of the people who live there. While Lydgate has in mind specific medical reforms within his profession, Dorothea's lack of a possible profession leaves her with no definite conceptions of how to make reforms, except by designing better cottages for her uncle's land. Unfortunately, the ideological themes that link Lydgate and Dorothea within the narrative tend to place Rosamond in opposition to both. Her selfish egoism, the driving force behind Lydgate's downfall, seems the reverse of their altruism, yet Rosamond's character is much more than Dorothea's foil.

Lydgate and Dorothea's plans for reform ultimately fail in their unsympathetic surroundings, his because the constraints of marriage interfere with his vocation, and hers because marriage is the only vocation allowed her. They both enter their marriages with the notion that the wife's role consists of dutifully assisting her husband in his professional endeavors. Yet this view encourages the reader to forget that Rosamond and Casaubon have preconceived ideals of marriage that also shatter.

The narrator describes marriage as a "yoke" for both Lydgate and Dorothea, implying that without this restraint they could have achieved great reforms. Dorothea

painfully decides to agree to Casaubon's deathbed request that she abide by his wishes and continue his work, in which she has no faith, even after his death. The narrator reports that she submits because of "her own compassion" in addition to "the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage" (M 481). Similarly, Lydgate surrenders his decisiveness, even in professional matters, to Rosamond, who prevails in every disagreement. When he decides to take an apprentice "'if Rosamond will not mind,'" the narrator deems his comment "a significant mark of the yoke he bore" (M 714). Lydgate's yoke makes him worthy of bearing the epithet "Poor Lydgate," bestowed upon him by the narrator in select comments on his marriage (M 714). The phrases "poor Dorothea" and "poor Rosamond" appear much more frequently, however, and almost exclusively as a lament of their mistaken ideals of marriage and the resulting disappointments.

On Lydgate and Rosamond's budding romance, the narrator comments: "Poor Lydgate! or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (M 165). The narrator's sympathy here shifts from Lydgate to Rosamond, stating that Lydgate should have realized how little Rosamond had to occupy herself, and therefore how much her happiness would be dependent on him: "It had not occurred to Lydgate that he had been a subject of eager meditation to Rosamond" (M 166). The narrative immediately following expounds on the idleness of Rosamond's life, the product of her useless education. The sympathetic, gently ironic tone used toward Rosamond's egoism throughout the end of the chapter shifts at the end to an ominous hint of the serious consequences that do indeed result from

her idleness and superfluous education. Mrs. Bulstrode wishes that Rosamond "might meet with a husband whose wealth corresponded to her habits" (M 167).

The shortsightedness, or lack of foresight, that some feminist critics point to as a flaw in Dorothea's noble character directly causes her misconceptions about marriage and what her married life with Casaubon will be like. Her inability to see what is obvious to everyone else can be interpreted as a kind of egoism, considering that she sees only what will further her religious goals. Celia, for example, feels pained by the "strong assumption of superiority in this Puritanic toleration" that Dorothea exhibits in the first scene when she initially renounces her mother's jewelry. The narrative voice regards her shortsightedness as a shortcoming, referring to the noble soul as "poor Dorothea" at key intervals when her shortsightedness contributes to her false ideal of marriage.

The first time the narrative voice refers to "poor Dorothea" occurs in the first chapter when Dorothea is contrasted with her sister: "Poor Dorothea! compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise" (M 9). Dorothea becomes "poor Dorothea" when, as Casaubon's fiancée, she initially enters his house, and again on the honeymoon when her frustrations get the better of her and make her "for the first time...troublesome to Mr. Casaubon" (M 74, 198). When Will thoughtlessly disparages Casaubon's work to Dorothea, she experiences a growing fear that her role in assisting Casaubon with his studies, and indeed the basis of their marriage, is in question: "Poor Dorothea felt a pang at the thought that the labour of her husband's life might be void" (M 208).

Soon after Rosamond and Lydgate are married, Rosamond's egocentric conception of the world becomes threatened. She feels alienated from her husband because she is unable to dissociate their economic misfortunes from Lydgate himself: "The poor thing saw only that the world was not ordered to her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world" (M 649). The phrase recurs more frequently as their troubles deepen and Rosamond and Lydgate grow farther apart. This line of narrative sympathy for Rosamond culminates when Dorothea discovers Will and Rosamond in a seemingly compromising situation. After Dorothea hurries away, Will explodes in anger at Rosamond, fearing that all chances of winning Dorothea's love have vanished. For the first time, Rosamond realizes that another woman is admired over her, and Will drives the point home quite painfully: "No other woman exists by the side of her. I would rather touch her hand if it were dead, than I would touch any other woman's living" (M 778).

The critic Russell Goldfarb makes a convincing case for a sympathetic reading of Rosamond throughout the novel; his treatment of this scene, however, misses the mark. Russell claims that at the point when Dorothea enters, and Will snatches his hands from Rosamond's, "[o]ne expects another authorial "Poor Rosamond!" but that instead Eliot focuses the primary importance on Will, delaying sympathy for Rosamond until later in the scene (97). Interpreting this scene as an opportunity for Will to prove himself "stronger than both Lydgate and Rosamond (and thus worthy of moving on Dorothea's rarefied level)," he places the importance of Dorothea's plotline over Rosamond's (97).

On the contrary, Will's display of anger and insults necessarily precede the "authorial 'Poor Rosamond!'" because the sympathy is for her shattered illusions and destroyed identity, not simply a disappointment from a prospective lover. Rosamond previously supposes that even in the midst of her troubles with Lydgate, she can still "make conquests and enslave men" to the same extent as before (M 436). Following Will's outburst, "The poor thing had no force to fling out any passion in return; the terrible collapse of the illusion towards which all her hope had been strained was a stroke which had too thoroughly shaken her" (M 780). Her whole conception of herself and her marriage turns upside down, and her loss of identity at that moment is reflected in the substitution of the phrase "the poor thing" for "Poor Rosamond," which appears for the first time since Rosamond's first sense of disappointment about her marriage. Instead of raising Dorothea and Will over Lydgate and Rosamond, the sympathy for Rosamond's turmoil has a leveling effect. The phrases "poor Dorothea" and "poor Rosamond," recurring at various stages of their dashed illusions of marriage, join the reader in sympathy for both women.

The final "poor Rosamond" solidifies the connection between them, occurring during Dorothea's second visit to Rosamond. Her egoism bears a strong resemblance to Dorothea's short-sightedness: "to poor Rosamond's pained confused vision it seemed that this Mrs. Casaubon…must have come now with the sense of having the advantage, and with animosity prompting her to use it" (M 793). Despite the obvious difference between them, that in a broad sense Rosamond cannot see the generosity in others while Dorothea cannot see the shortcomings in others, their faulty "vision" serves to protect their respective illusions of marriage as well as their own identities.

Significantly, the narrator never calls Mary Garth "poor Mary." Her sense of self and her ideals of marriage are realistic and do not need protecting by any mistaken ideas about either marriage or her role in it. Comparing Mary's strengths to the others' weaknesses, Waddle argues that Mary's role is to "provide such a contrast to Rosamond and Dorothea that we pity them" (20).

While Rosamond's stubborn self-centeredness contrasts drastically with Dorothea's constant need to help others, they share with Mary a strong, assertive will. A straightforward example lies in their disregard of public opinion about their marriages. Dorothea, Rosamond and Mary all become engaged despite the disapproval of family and friends; even Dorothea's second marriage defies the public's sense of propriety. Dorothea's need for access to a worthwhile vocation, Rosamond's determination to marry a man of good family and high connections, and Mary's loyalty to her best friend and childhood love are all forces not to be compromised. The women stand behind what they want, refusing to compromise no matter who disagrees with them. Even Rosamond, who values the community's perception of her above almost everything else, ignores its negative view of Lydgate and their match. Their strong wills render Dorothea and Rosamond more alike than they seem at first glance.

Lee Edwards comments on the strong wills of both characters: "Although Rosamond is in many ways Dorothea's opposite, they are opposed as two sides of the same coin are opposed and are certainly bonded by the common metal of their energy" (236). Gilbert and Gubar claim that the climactic scene between Dorothea and Rosamond is in fact "the climax of Middlemarch," in part because Dorothea

comes to feel sympathy for the plight of another woman while Rosamond acts in 'a reflex of [Dorothea's] energy'" (518). Yet, Edwards interprets their energies as being divided by the structure of the novel, which separates "Dorothea and Lydgate and their foils Casaubon and Rosamond" (231).

The likeness between the characters that results from their strong wills only goes so far. Rosamond's strong will is straightforward; in every situation she determines what will most benefit herself, and she focuses her energies on that goal. Dorothea's will on the other hand, though her resolve is unchangeable once she makes up her mind, is divided: "The conflict between religion and sexual feeling and the conflict between the conventional lot of women and her desire for vocation divide Dorothea against herself" (127). Whereas Dorothea wavers between renouncing and keeping the jewels, and she "look[s] forward to renouncing" horseback riding despite that she "enjoy[s] it in a pagan sensuous way," Rosamond does not hesitate to express the exact opposite sentiments (M 10). Significantly juxtaposed at the very end of the first chapter, "Miss Brooke," Rosamond looks forward to being given the chestnut to ride after Dorothea rejects the offer of a chestnut from Sir James (M 118). Later when Rosamond learns of Lydgate's financial troubles, she surrenders her amethysts, the jewel that Dorothea discards because it so contrasts with her complexion, coldly and with unconcealed resentment, though behaving "irreproachably" (M 14, 597).

For feminists who see the major struggle of the novel occurring between Dorothea's altruism and her inability to transform her generous tendencies into great reforms, Rosamond represents an embodiment of the force that prevents Dorothea

from attaining such achievements. Through the thematic parallels between Dorothea and Lydgate, Rosamond's obstruction of her husband's medical reforms makes her selfishness seem the antithesis of Dorothea's outlook on life. Rosamond's selfishness and Dorothea's generosity, however, are manifestations of the same force: strength of purpose. They merely reflect two possible reactions to very similar constraining expectations placed upon them.

The similarity of Casaubon and Lydgate's opinions about the desirable submissiveness of a wife place Dorothea and Rosamond in similar situations. Lydgate reflects on his future happiness when he and Rosamond set the date for their wedding, satisfied that he has "found perfect womanhood" (M 352). He envisions Rosamond's role as his wife:

> "an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them; who would create order in the home and accounts with still magic, yet keep her fingers ready to touch the lute and transform life into romance at any moment; who was instructed to the true womanly limit and not a hair's-breadth beyond—docile, therefore, and ready to carry out behests which came from beyond that limit." (M 352)

Lydgate's ruminations eerily echo Casaubon's words to Dorothea upon their engagement: "You have all—nay, more than all—those qualities which I have ever regarded as the characteristic excellences of womanhood" (M 50). His letter to her more clearly defines the qualities he seeks and values: "this rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast

a charm over vacant hours" (M 44). The two men seek the same qualities in a wife, those of the stereotypical Victorian "angel in the house."

In his chapter entitled "Of Queen's Gardens," the Victorian literary critic John Ruskin describes at length the desired qualities of the ideal wife, or "angel in the house[17]" and the appropriate education for women to prepare them for their wifely roles[18]. Ruskin characterizes the wife's role as a guide, contending that instead of a servant to her husband, woman was "made to be the helpmate of man" (184). He explains the apparent contradiction between the "guiding function of the woman" and "true wifely subjection" by claiming that "it is a *guiding*, not a determining, function" (193). The man is "the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender" who protects his wife from the outside world while "her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision...her great function is Praise," a gender construction that Eliot repeatedly reverses (193). Dorothea's energy and passion best exemplify the untruth of Ruskin's formulation, and her inability to find an outlet for it merely reflects the damage that such a formulation can have on women in this society. Dorothea and Mary are both "doers," constantly looking for ways to improve the world around them. Dorothea's famous phrase, "Tell me what I can do" contrasts with Rosamond's "What can *I* do?" (M 289, 594), but even Rosamond's

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17. Named for Coventry Patmore's poem "The Angel in the House," 1854-63, Poems (London: George Bell and Sons, 1921).
18. Marlene Springer cites Dr. John Gregory's A Father's Legacy to His Daughters and Mrs. Sarah Ellis's "Women of England" as other works influential in the development of this particular marriage ideology (128).

portrayal counters Ruskin. The relationship between Lydgate and Rosamond, which fits Ruskin's mold so closely, fails miserably.

Dorothea and Rosamond are set up as potential "angels," but they also deviate from the standard in important ways. Both the narrator and other characters refer to Rosamond as an "angel" numerous times; she even looks like one. Her education at Mrs. Lemon's fits the criteria of a perfect lady, and she keeps the house in order and fills it with music and romance when necessary. Modeled so closely after the standard ideal wife, Rosamond becomes a parody of the "angel." In fact, her strong will is the major way she deviates. Her opinions are so strong that she crosses the line from "guiding" her husband to "determining" everything about their marriage. Lack of submissiveness goes hand in hand with Rosamond's lack of interest in or respect for her husband's work. She fits the mold to such an extreme that she becomes destructive.

Dorothea represents a much more genuine version of the "angel in the house," in the sense that she enters marriage with Casaubon wishing only to assist him in his academic work on religion. She accepts his proposal, "pouring out her joy at the thought of devoting herself to him, and of learning how she might best share and further all his great ends" (M 50). Seeking no fulfillment for herself in marriage except through what she can do to be a helpful guide for her husband, Dorothea "was not in the least teaching Mr. Casaubon to ask if he were good enough for her, but merely asking herself how she could be good enough for Mr. Casaubon" (M 51).

Her pious reasons for marrying Casaubon, for whom she feels no passion, she does not entirely invent for herself. Her extensive inner dialogue as she fantasizes

about marriage to Casaubon begins with the first sentence of Chapter 3: "If it had really occurred to Mr Casaubon to think of Miss Brooke as a suitable wife for him, the reasons that might induce her to accept him were already planted in her mind, and by the next evening of the next day the reasons had budded and bloomed" (M 24). The image of a blooming flower points forward in the novel to Rosamond, whose signature descriptive image is a blooming flower in her cheeks, eyes, and even in her name. The image also uncomfortably resembles Lydgate's comparison of Rosamond to a basil plant, which "flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains" (M 835). The overpowering sterility of Casaubon's entire physical and mental being, however, opposes the natural fertility of a blooming flower. When the image of the flower reappears later in reference to Will, it seems much more apt. During her night of anguish after discovering Will with Rosamond, when she finally admits, "Oh, I did love him!" she mourns her "lost belief which she had planted and kept alive from a very little seed since the days in Rome" that there might be hope for them to be together in the future (M 786).

Casaubon values her intellect, but only insomuch as he perceives in her "an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness," not a classically educated or creative mind. To the extent that Dorothea's firm sense of duty and her compassion compel her to be a submissive, helpful wife to Casaubon, she has opinions of her own and, like Rosamond, resists blindly committing her life to supporting work in which she has no faith.

The constraints of the guiding role that Dorothea chooses for herself allow no room for her differences of opinion. Her repeated defense of her husband, especially

to Will, and her growing sense of sympathy for him do not prevent her from finally perceiving clearly the flaws in Casaubon's work and the hopelessness of her contribution to it. His vague and unreasonable deathbed request that she obey all his wishes, live by his judgment and devote herself to his work after his death, tests the boundaries of her will and her blind compliance. Dorothea hesitates, "unable to resolve," because she suspects that his request unfairly demands too much from her, but ultimately she decides to make the indefinite promise that he asks (M 480). The narrator observes that "she was too weak, too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on her husband, to do anything but submit completely" (M 481). Dorothea's will falters, illustrating that her tendency for self-sacrifice is as much a fault as a virtue. Alongside Rosamond's unwavering resolution, Dorothea's self-sacrifice, prevented only by Casaubon's convenient death before she has the chance to voice her affirmation, seems the much more dangerous shortcoming.

Rosamond at least marries Lydgate for love, albeit a narcissistic love: "Rosamond thought that no one could be more in love than she was" (M 352). Rosamond and Lydgate's union alludes to the future relationship of Dorothea and Will. Just as they affirm their engagement, the narrator describes them with imagery otherwise reserved for Dorothea and Will. Dorothea's character is repeatedly associated with water imagery, and the sunlight imagery used to describe Will often contrasts with Casaubon's dark and gloomy features and personality. Side by side, Rosamond and Lydgate sit "for many minutes which flowed by them like a small gurgling brook with the kisses of the sun upon it" (M 352). Thus a marriage with

affection, perhaps even love, cannot happily survive the constraints of a patriarchal ideology of marriage that has no place for an assertive woman.

The parallels that Dorothea shares with Lydgate and Rosamond establish her as having energy and potential equal to that of Lydgate, while those energies are suppressed by the male expectations of a wife's submissive role in marriage. Dorothea's mistaken ideals of marriage could be attributed to her own shortcomings, such as her metaphorical shortsightedness, but for the parallels with Rosamond. In the context of Rosamond's similarly disappointed ideals, the destructive ideology appears not to be unique to Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon or their individual characters, but rather a symptom of the problems of a society. While comparisons with Rosamond shed light on Dorothea's first marriage, an exploration of the similarities between Dorothea and Mary lend a new understanding to Dorothea's second marriage.

Chapter Three

"Mary Garth: Redefined Heir of a Patriarchal Will"

Mary Garth presents a problem for feminist critics because her conventional life, consistently upheld throughout the novel as the ideal, appears to be an "affirmation of the private realm" (MG 16). In character analyses, most critics either dismiss Mary as a stereotype of morality and "mundane duty," or they ignore her completely (Schorer 13). Dorothea, on the other hand, is simultaneously praised for her potential to break free from stereotypes and criticized for failing that potential. Yet Mary and Dorothea share similarities that are consistently overlooked by feminist critics. The striking similarities in the plot trajectories followed by the two characters invite a comparison of their character representations. Mary and Dorothea's similar situations culminate in their marriages to Fred and Will, respectively. By examining the scenes in which Mary's situation echoes or foreshadows Dorothea's situation, their respective character traits can be evaluated in terms of each other and not just the established stereotypes.

Within the novel's story lines, Mary and Dorothea never meet; they never even appear in the same scene. They would not normally encounter each other in society due to their different class positions, but it is still feasible that they could meet within the social confines of the novel. There are many scenes, such as a funeral or an auction, however, that are inclusive of every level of society in which they could appear together. Mark Schorer discusses these social scenes in relationship to the unity of the novel as places "where representatives of most of the five stories are

allowed to come together" (Schorer 13). Featherstone's funeral is one such instance, but Dorothea observes the funeral from her high window. That Mary and Dorothea never do meet only strengthens the symbolism of the parallels between them by drawing attention to their vastly different social classes and positions in the novel.

Instead of categorizing Dorothea as an extraordinary woman and Mary as an ordinary woman, one should consider their circumstances. Different social classes imply different circumstances, yet Dorothea and Mary share eerily similar situations within the plot of the novel. The distinction between ordinary and extraordinary begins to break down when one considers Dorothea to be an ordinary woman with extraordinary social standing and Mary to be an extraordinary woman with ordinary social standing. Gillian Beer asserts that "[t]here is no opposition between the 'ordinary' and the 'exceptional' in this work" (197). To an extent this is true, but only because the hierarchy is collapsed as Mary redefines the social institutions in which she takes part.

Mary quite obviously belongs to the working class. Her father Caleb manages Dorothea's family estates, Tipton and Lowick. Their social standing is a point of tension in the novel because Fred's middle-class manufacturing family disapproves of his relationship with Mary as a step down in the world. Mrs. Vincy looks down on them: "the Garths are so poor, and live in such a small way" (M 102). Dorothea, on the other hand, is a member of the landowning class. Before her marriage to Casaubon she is "regarded as an heiress" because her son would inherit her uncle's estate, and after her husband's death she becomes a very wealthy woman (M 9).

Mary and Dorothea both defy the wishes of their family members by marrying. Dorothea has no encouragement from anyone in her union with either Casaubon or Will. She is thought by her friends to be marrying beneath her, whereas Mary's situation is more complicated. Mrs. Vincy disapproves completely of Mary as a match for Fred, whereas Mrs. Garth prefers Farebrother over Fred as a match for Mary. Critics regularly lament Dorothea's marriage to Will as a compromise and a waste, but accept Mary's marriage to Fred merely as a matter of course. Feminists have higher standards of achievement for Dorothea than they do for Mary, because she has an inheritance at her disposal to use toward achieving her ideals of doing some good in the world[19].

For feminists, Mary and Dorothea's marriages represent the choice of the private sphere over the public sphere. The feminist critic Keith Waddle observes that "Mary can be accused, much like Dorothea[20]...of subverting feminist goals by being content with a conventional marriage and family rather than pursuing a career" (24)[21]. Mary generally constitutes a loss for feminism from the very beginning of the novel because she seems to uphold the conservative moral ideal. The Garths are often seen

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19. Alternatively, Dorothea cannot remain a widow because the status is so circumstantial and uncommon. Dorothea Barrett observes that "Eliot rejects philanthropic womanhood as a solution because it ignores very real sexual needs...[and] it is only attainable by wealthy women whose husbands have been conveniently removed by death" (133).
20. Waddle attributes the argument made about Dorothea to Lee Edwards' Psyche as Hero.
21. Waddle argues that Mary embodies the Wollstonecraftian feminist ideals that Eliot herself endorsed, valuing "strength and truthfulness" and "compassion that can appreciate both the great and the humble" (MG 17).

as the moral center[22] of the novel, and Mary and Fred's relationship the ideal one for couples. Dorothea's marriage to Will is considered a special sacrifice because of the St. Theresa-like high ideals of reform that she relinquishes in favor of her marriage. Ironically, when placed in a very similar situation as Dorothea, Mary occupies a position more public than private, and Dorothea vice versa. Both women play wifely roles, but in reality Mary lives at Stone Court and works for Featherstone because she delays acceptance of the private realm indefinitely by refusing to marry Fred. As Bert Hornback notes, Mary will not "give up her own way of life, her principles, to marry him" (100). Unlike Dorothea in her marriage to Casaubon, Mary does ask herself whether Fred is good enough for her.

Mary's marriage crises resemble Dorothea's, beginning with her residence at Stone Court. Mary's employment by Featherstone acts in the novel as a metaphorical marriage. When Featherstone's relatives are gathered in his house waiting for him to die, they regard Mary as a fixture in the house and as such, one who may benefit from the inheritance. Trumbull observes her mixing Featherstone's medicine and comments to the other visitors on her evident care, "That is a great point in a woman, and a great point for our friend upstairs, poor dear old soul. A man whose life is of any value should think of his wife as a nurse: that is what I should do, if I married" (M 313). Trumbull represents Mary's role at Stone Court as a wifely role.

Both Mary and Dorothea are in subordinate positions to older men who drain them emotionally. Featherstone abuses and debases Mary, and Casaubon, who is sullen and irritable, treats Dorothea coldly. A connection between their positions is

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22. See Haight 8; Hornback 60; WEM 231; and MG 21.

implied in the narrator's observation of Mary that, "To be anxious about a soul that is always snapping at you must be left to the saints of the earth; and Mary was not one of them" (M 315). Dorothea's alignment with St. Theresa is already established, and she proves herself just this kind of saint later in the novel, when her anxiety about Casaubon's comfort and happiness compels her to make an enormous sacrifice. Thus a structural similarity but fundamental difference in character is brought to light.

The major difference between their relationships with these men is that Mary is *not* in fact married to Featherstone, though she occupies a position in his house resembling that of a wife. Mary is tied to Featherstone for economical reasons that surpass merely duty, the critical stereotype for her motivations. Mary works for Featherstone because she is morally opposed to being paid for work that she does not do well. Mary claims that she does not want to be a governess because she is not good at it: "I have tried being a teacher, but I am not fit for that...I think any hardship is better than pretending to do what one is paid for, and never really doing it" (M 137). Mary stays at Stone Court because of a high ideal of vocation; she is "too honest with herself to carry on the farce of women's education as it was then designed" (MG 25). Dorothea, her marital expectations disappointed, finds herself in an affectionless marriage in a position more like a secretary than that of a wife. The narrator maintains that "Casaubon's original reluctance to let Dorothea work with him had given place to the contrary disposition, namely, to demand much interest and labour from her" (M 476). Yet, in contrast to Mary, she feels a certain duty to Casaubon because of her marital bond and the obligations that enatails. Dorothea marries Casaubon under the

mistaken ideal that she will find her vocation through him, but even after she realizes her mistake she still genuinely cares for her husband's health.

Mary and Dorothea's "marriages" to Featherstone and Casaubon illuminate a major difference between them; Mary's clear-sightedness opposes Dorothea's shortsightedness. Mary does not have illusions: "For honesty, truth-telling fairness, was Mary's reigning virtue: she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behoof" (M 113). Dorothea, on the other hand, is under many illusions about her first marriage. A few weeks into her marriage, she felt that "the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither" (M 195). For the most part, critics agree that Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon was necessary for her to have her eyes opened and to do away with illusion. References to Dorothea's literal and metaphorical shortsightedness are frequent. Her lack of foresight and sometimes poor judgement of character arise from her social position, caught between the public and private worlds. Hornback argues that both Mary and Dorothea are idealists, but that "Mary is much more the practical idealist because she knows the world better and knows how to work in it" (73). Further, he argues that as Dorothea "learns more about the world she becomes more self-assertive in it" (Hornback 100).

Their awareness of their worlds stems in part from their different educational backgrounds, which they receive because of the difference between their social classes. Mary attends Miss Lemon's school along with Rosamond, but as Gordon Haight observes, she is "an articled pupil, an apprentice, preparing (like her mother

before her) to earn her living as a teacher" (5). Dorothea was educated impracticably "first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family at Lausanne" (M 8). A passage from the first edition of the novel implicates the inadequate education for women as a major force opposing Dorothea's search for a vocation, blaming her mistakes, namely her marriage to Casaubon, "on modes of education which make a woman's knowledge another name for motley ignorance" (qtd. in Springer 142-3). The passage presents a problem in terms of Eliot's own feminism because "the phrase concerning women's education is not in the manuscript, and...[Eliot] also expunged it from the second and subsequent editions" (Springer 142). Many believe it reveals a "complex ambivalence toward the contemporary lot of women" and the role of education in shaping women's lives (Springer 142).

Mary's sense of humor has much to do with her awareness of her world. Haight claims that except for Mrs. Cadwallader, "no character in Middlemarch has a keener sense of humor than Mary Garth" (6). The narrator's praise of Mary's honesty and her refusal to create illusions continues: "when she was in a good mood she had humor enough in her to laugh at herself" (M 113). When Fred breaks the news to Mary that he has put a financial burden on her family because of his gambling, she eventually forgives him and her face assumes "its full illumination of fun" (M 255). Just before her more acute crisis at Featherstone's deathbed, the narrator comments that "she had already come to take life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part " (M 314). Her humorous attitude toward life came about "because she had learned to make no unreasonable claims...things were not likely to be arranged for her personal

satisfaction, [and] she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at that fact" (M 314). Feminists might criticize Mary's character for not challenging her situation, but Mary deals with it in a way that lessens her burdens. In contrast, Dorothea and Rosamond "never betray a trace of humor" (Haight 7).

Lessening her burdens, however, need not be confused with merely making the best of her situation. Far from submissively accepting her lot, Mary redefines the power dynamics of her relationship with Fred. Far too often for Fred's comfort, Mary seems "provokingly mistress of the situation" (M 138). Rosamond also reigns over her husband, but the difference is that Mary "is not dependent on male approval" (Gilbert 506). Nancy Paxton observes that "Mary's power over Fred suggests a reversal of traditional sex roles that has often been regarded as one of the features dividing the Garth's 'comic' subplot from the more 'heroic' stories of Lydgate and Dorothea" (187). Mary's resistance to Featherstone's assertion of power through his will, the patriarchal system of inheritance, exemplifies her rejection of societal institutions that limit her power and her freedom.

The dying wishes of Featherstone and Casaubon would, if granted, compromise the futures of both young women. Mary and Dorothea are in unique positions of power, possessing the ability to give or deny the men what they most long for. On his deathbed, Featherstone asks Mary to burn one of his wills, an act she sees as morally wrong and which would incriminate her in the eyes of his relatives. Mary answers his request with no hesitation: "I will not let the close of your life soil the beginning of mine. I will not touch your iron chest or your will" (M 316). She

answers in the same characteristic speech pattern that the critic Derek Oldfield observes in Dorothea, with simple, straightforward phrases beginning with "I" (65).

A further structural similarity that results from their decisions emerges as the effects of the men's wills become known. Wills are a means of power that men have at their disposal in Victorian society, and Featherstone and Casaubon use their wills to exert power over other, younger men as well as women. Mary is unaware of the contents of either will at the time that Featherstone asks her to burn one; she does not know that through passive noncompliance she prevents Fred from inheriting a large sum of money. Unwittingly, Mary's honesty and integrity causes Fred's disappointed prospects. Farebrother's disclosure later in the novel that the will would have been invalid anyway reveals that Mary never had any real power after all. Thus Mary never has any actual power to influence the patriarchal will, or intention, through Featherstone's written will, but she is given power in the narrative to reject its influence over her.

Dorothea, through her repeated mention of Will's name, unknowingly makes her husband jealous. She pleads for Will to receive what he deserves of Casaubon's estate, not just what he is entitled to legally: "we should regard his claim as a much greater one, even to the half of that property which I know that you have destined for me. And I think he ought at once to be provided for on that understanding" (M 374). Casaubon creates a codicil in his will as a result of his jealousy, preventing her from ever marrying Will and ensuring that he inherits nothing. Admitting that she owes her devotion to her husband even after his death would have bound her to him indefinitely; she would have unwittingly sacrificed her freedom to marry whom she

chooses, not just her freedom to seek her own vocation. Out of her weakness she resolves to make the promise, but it quickly becomes evident that the ability to keep herself free to marry Will was never in her power at all. She was saved by circumstance from devoting her life to Casaubon's work since he died before she could answer. Moreover, the codicil preventing her from marrying Will had already been drafted even before Casaubon asked for her promise. His power extends past his death to influence, through his legal will, society's opinion of Dorothea and her relationship to Will. The money she inherits combined with the insinuation that there had been reason for Casaubon to be jealous keep Dorothea and Will apart, forces already set in place before she resolves to grant Casaubon's last wish.

Mary and Dorothea's opposition to the wills ties in closely to their attitudes about marriage. Reading Eliot's works as a response to Herbert Spencer's evolutionary theory, Nancy Paxton interprets Mary and Dorothea's confrontations as evidence of "Eliot's resistance to Spencer's notion that the integration of property and marriage laws was a sign of social progress" (194)[23]. She claims that "the laws of property may corrupt the moral foundation of marriage;" by rejecting the patriarchal authority of Featherstone's wills, Mary enters a marriage that "does not signal the 'just transmission of property' but rather their mutual and voluntary commitment to the ethics of work and self-help" (Paxton 195-6). Dorothea more conspicuously

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23. Paxton appreciates the significance of Rosamond and Mary's characters as well as Dorothea's, examining instances of maternal feelings in each of them. She maintains that Eliot equates maternal love with erotic love as a response to Spencer's evolutionary theory to portray the falsehood of a maternal instinct (185-89). Rosamond's miscarraige and Dorothea's indifference to her infant nephew further the parallels between the characters.

renounces the patriarchal law simply by marrying Will; she gives up her inheritance from Casaubon in order to marry him. Dorothea renounces her fortune not for the sake of renunciation itself, but because it will afford her the fulfillment of her sexual desires. Praising the "satisfaction of the heart's desires rather than the cool gratifications of self-sacrifice," Paxton endorses the "celebration of passionate love rather than…safe transmission of property" that she finds in the novel's conclusion (196-7).

The similarities between Mary and Dorothea's situations culminate with their romantic relationships with Fred and Will. They both "save" the young men from lives of idleness. Mary's constant affection combined with guidance from Caleb Garth and Farebrother are vital to helping Fred find a suitable vocation and keeping him from gambling. Their very different ideas of reform are uniquely connected to their ideals of marriage; Mary seeks to reform her husband, whereas Dorothea seeks social and religious reform through the institution of marriage. The problem with interpreting these situations as positions of power that Mary and Dorothea occupy with influence over their husbands has to do with the Victorian ideals of marriage and the figure of the "angel in the house." Their influence might be seen as the guiding influence of Ruskin's "angel," but Mary and Dorothea both define marriage on their own terms. Dorothea rejects the oppressive inheritance from Casaubon, thereby rejecting the wealth that defines status in marriage among members of Dorothea's class. Mary similarly rejects the patriarchal marriage structure by defining marriage on her own terms, upholding her father's values of hard work over Fred's aspirations to a leisurely gentleman's life. Mary's will is of a different kind than Dorothea's and

Rosamond's; she bridges the gap between selfishness and generosity, redefining marriage ultimately for the betterment of her spouse as well as herself. Other qualities Ruskin ascribes to the perfect wife are ones that Mary and Dorothea often transcend as well.

Marlene Springer and Susan Gorsky both explain how Ruskin's ideas are represented in Victorian novels. Gorsky outlines the various stereotypes of female characters in Victorian literature, suggesting that the "catalogue given with the introduction to most heroines" has common standards, and that the "heroines" are defined in deviations from the standard (32). Other female characters who are not "heroines" fit into categories ranging from angel to demon. Mary and Dorothea's characters, in contrast to Rosamond, are given depth beyond appearances early on in the novel. Their initial descriptions are essential to the developments of their characters both individually and in comparison to one another.

Gorsky suggests that it is Dorothea's plain clothing that departs from the heroine's stereotype, in which case the deviation comes before the catalogue itself (33). The first line of Book One, "Miss Brooke," reads: "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress." Her wrist, profile and stature are described next. The heroine is supposed to be "beyond pretty," and it is the "dignity" and "impressiveness" of Dorothea's beauty that is noted in the opening paragraph. The poor dress segues into her character traits; pride, economy, and religion are the reasons for the state of her wardrobe. Dorothea's description quickly moves from the surface to other aspects such as her cleverness and good connections. The extensive "catalogue" of physical features never really comes, but rather is

revealed little by little through deeper descriptions of her beliefs: "Miss Brooke's large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking" (M 9). Her flushed cheeks, a primary feature in the "catalogue" according to Gorsky, are associated with her struggle for spirituality and her love of self-sacrifice. The physical description emerges in the statement, "She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked "very little like a devotee," which refers to horseback riding and the pleasure she receives from renouncing the pastime (M 10).

The first mention of Mary comes near the end of Book One when Rosamond playfully mentions Mary's name to Fred. Mrs. Vincy in turn gives her opinion of Mary's physical appearance, the reader's first impression of her: "I think Mary Garth a dreadful plain girl--more fit for a governess" (M 102). Mrs. Vincy's pettiness leads the reader to expect more from Mary, and to not accept such a simple assertion about her. The first narrative description of Mary begins when she invites Rosamond into her room at Stone Court. The girls are characterized as sharing the same education and childhood memories, and as "lik[ing] very well to talk in private" (M 109). Thus from the beginning Mary is associated with the private: governess, nurse and the private space of the house. The physical description of both girls takes place with Rosamond standing in front of a mirror. Rosamond's features are listed in the manner of Gorsky's "catalogue," as discussed in the previous chapter. The description of Mary that immediately follows Rosamond's, however, is quite the opposite of the list of stereotypically desirable features: "Mary Garth, on the contrary, had the aspect of an ordinary sinner: she was brown; her curly dark hair was rough and stubborn; her

stature was low; and it would not be true to declare, in satisfactory antithesis, that she had all the virtues" (M 112).

According to Ruskin, the woman should be as nearly as possible "incapable of error" and "enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise" (194). Clearly Mary is not meant to be so good as that; whereas Dorothea's appearance is described in relation to her religious ardor, Mary's is linked to sin. Her plainness is further described as carrying with it the "temptations and vices" that also come with beauty, and she possesses an unangelic "streak of satiric bitterness" (M 112-13). Mary goes on to mock the Victorian catalogue of the heroine when she teasingly answers Rosamond's plea for a description of Lydgate: "How can one describe a man? I can give you an inventory: heavy eyebrows, dark eyes, a straight nose, thick dark hair, large solid white hands--and--let me see--oh, an exquisite cambric pocket handkerchief" (M 114).

As for wisdom, Mary does not have the "perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl," which Dorothea likewise does not possess (M 113). Still, the mention of Rembrandt lends dignity to Mary's description; her features have "intelligent honesty," one of the features characteristic of the heroine. We have seen that Mary is wiser than Dorothea in the sense that she is more aware of the world around her, and that Dorothea grows wiser as the novel progresses. Waddle defends Mary against unsympathetic critics, claiming that "nothing really bad ever happens to Dorothea or Rosamond that is not of their own making, whereas Mary faces difficulties beyond her control" (MG 20).

Mary and Dorothea both violate one of Ruskin's major tenets: "There is one dangerous science for women--one which they must indeed beware how they profanely touch--that of theology" (199). The conversation Mary has with Rosamond about Fred reveals Mary's opinions of clergy. Rosamond thinks Fred should finish his education and take religious orders, but Mary disagrees. She believes that he is "not fit to be a clergyman" and claims that even though he may have no fortune left to him she would rather he not be a "great hypocrite" (M 115). Dorothea's "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 own rule of conduct there" (M 8). Statements like these separate Dorothea from other marriageable girls without such extreme notions. Yet at the same time what Dorothea is looking for from the very beginning is essentially a "rule of conduct," which is exactly what feminists want Dorothea to avoid.

Mary and Dorothea's relationships to knowledge and intellectualism arise from circumstances of dependence, but the dependence acquires two different meanings. Dorothea may not have the wisdom necessary to understand her world at the beginning of the novel, but she does have curiosity. She enters a marriage based on a teacher-student relationship because she believes that by learning Hebrew and helping Casaubon with his studies, she can in turn help society through him. Gilbert and Gubar point out that "[t]he eroticism of inequality--the male teacher and the enamored female student...illustrates both how dependent women are upon male approval and how destructive such dependence is" (506). Not only does she depend

on Casaubon for approval, she depends on him for knowledge that he cannot or will not provide.

Around the same time that Casaubon visits Dorothea at her uncle's house, Fred visits Mary at Stone Court. Fred supplies Mary with books that she would be unable to get elsewhere, and he does so against the express wishes of Featherstone, whom he tries so hard to please. When Featherstone commands him to stop bringing books because he thinks the newspaper should be enough for her, the narrator reports that "Fred had received this order before, and had secretly disobeyed it. He intended to disobey it again" (M 112). In this case Mary depends on Fred for the transmission of knowledge, or at least the tools for knowledge, but Mary has a different relationship to knowledge than Dorothea. Mary does not seek societal or religious reform through her access to knowledge or intellectualism. Her wisdom represents once again the power reversal of her relationship with Fred; Mary uses the knowledge she gains from books to keep Fred in line.

Deirdre David defines two different kinds of intellectuals: organic and traditional. The organic intellectual "accompan[ies] any social group to power...and may be extended to include all those who participate in the transmission of ideas," whereas the traditional intellectual is "usually opposed to an emergent social class" (David 4). Mary qualifies as an organic intellectual, eventually writing a children's book adapted from the classics. The idea of a woman intellectual reforming society through ideas walks a fine line for feminists; it brings feminists back to the debate about reform through political action versus reform through ideas. David contends that "the role of intellectual as moral teacher aligns itself with the role of Victorian

women as instructive angel in the house" (David 14). David discusses George Eliot and other female writers' roles as "working intellectuals," writing books as a profession in order to earn a living (David *ix*). While Mary is not a "working intellectual," she is the only true woman intellectual in the novel. Historically, according to David, intellectuals as a social group are "virtually always of the male sex and masculine gender" (1). Feminists have labeled Mary's values as masculine, as Waddle observes (MG 17). The attribution of traditionally male literary power in the historical context of the novel to a female combines both sides of the feminist debate, the action with the ideals. Mary and Dorothea are "both concerned with 'doing' and being 'useful,'" but "Mary's way of acting is much more genuinely thoughtful than Dorothea's" (Hornback 61, 69).

The structural similarities between Dorothea and Mary connect the two characters across narrative and class boundaries, as well as boundaries of private and public spheres. Beginning with the defiance of their families' wishes in marrying, both characters reject forced submissiveness by a patriarchal society. Mary rejects patriarchal law in her confrontation with Featherstone; Dorothea likewise resists the "dead hand" of Casaubon that seeks to control her from the grave through his will, though at this point she does not yet possess the clear-sightedness that allows Mary has to understand the significance of submitting to the dying man's request. Dorothea and Mary both seek knowledge and form opinions about theology beyond what is expected of women. Eventually, they both define marriage on their own terms. Beneath the surface Mary proves to be much less conventional than she seems, and Dorothea progressively acquires more of Mary's nontraditional qualities.

Conclusions

The single word "will" joins together Dorothea, Rosamond and Mary with its multiple and overlapping meanings. One sense of the word implies desire, choice and intention; another refers to a legal last will and testament; the third will is Will Ladislaw himself, at the center of feminist discussion of Middlemarch because of what his marriage to Dorothea implies for the fate of the heroine. Each woman's strong, goal-oriented will takes a different form; Rosamond's is unwaveringly selfish while Dorothea's is divided between desire for renunciation and desire for fulfillment. Mary's will is steadfastly honest, allowing her to defy Featherstone when he asserts control through his written will. Dorothea's divided will prevents her from definitively resisting Casaubon's tyranny, which he also seeks to assert through a written will, or codicil.

Dorothea's struggle to reform her will reflects on a large scale her relationships with Rosamond and Mary. She vacillates between the egoism of renunciation, which Rosamond represents in the parallels to Dorothea's first marriage, and the honest recognition of her desires, which Mary represents in the parallels to Dorothea's second marriage. Thus neither Rosamond nor Mary acts as a foil for Dorothea; they both represent aspects of her complex character. This is not to say, however, that Mary and Rosamond are simple characters. They deserve to be appreciated in their own right, and not merely as tools for interpreting Dorothea.

Ultimately, Dorothea's reformation of will ends in triumph as she recognizes her passionate love for Will Ladislaw. Still, Dorothea remains unable to achieve any

kind of reform in the public sphere other than through her husband. The tension between public and private reform remains at the end of the novel, but it need not reflect specifically on Dorothea's marriage and discovery of happiness in the private sphere. As the importance of the heroine as a role model disappears in feminist criticism, critics must recognize the validity and usefulness of reading multiple heroines against each other. Sometimes this means accepting unresolved tensions between public and private. The very different representations of marriage in Middlemarch suggest that marriage does not have to be either a tragedy or a happy ending; it can be both an outward compromise and an inner triumph and freedom.

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