Resting in "Unvisited Tombs": Middlemarch and Eliot's Ideal of Feminine Heroism

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RESTING IN "UNVISITED TOMBS": MIDDLEMARCH AND ELIOT'S IDEAL OF FEMININE HEROISM

by

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A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Diploma in The Department of English to The Honors Program of The University of Alabama in Huntsville

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ABSTRACT

By examining Dorothea Brooke in relation to Eliot’s conservative form of feminism, it becomes clear that the author’s feminine ideal is based on the reality of Victorian experience. Accordingly, Dorothea remains ordinary and unexceptional throughout Middlemarch despite a strong feminist call for extraordinary heroines. However, by making Dorothea a representational figure for nineteenth-century womanhood, Eliot is able to accomplish a number of important literary tasks, not the least of which includes raising women to a position of influence within their cultural fetters. In doing so, Eliot is able to create a new form of heroism completely based on the unique qualities of women such as fellow feeling, moral superiority, and self-sacrifice. At the same time, Eliot emphasizes the importance of developing a keen sense of self-awareness and a healthy self-love so that the heroine’s feminine influence remains effective and distinct. Therefore, while Eliot’s heroine cannot achieve greatness in the masculine sense, she is able to mark out a significant role for herself within the Victorian social tradition.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Throughout *Middlemarch*, George Eliot depicts the growth, struggle, and sacrifice of her young heroine, Dorothea Brooke, who, as Eliot’s “Prelude” suggests, is one of the “many [Saint] Theresas” born without any hope of leading an epic life or accomplishing “long-recognizable deeds” and whose “spiritual grandeur [was] ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity” (3-4). In her presentation of Dorothea, Eliot has often been accused of having antifeminist feeling since her heroine fails to defy social tradition and achieve a meaningful life of reform like that of her saintly model. Many feminist critics are also uncomfortable with the fact that Eliot herself was able to transcend social convention and realize her public aspirations while dooming her heroine to a life of domestic mediocrity.

As early as 1919, Virginia Woolf raises this issue of author versus creation by contrasting Eliot’s exceptional life with the pitiable fates of her female characters. In “George Eliot,” located in *The Common Reader*, Woolf notes that “save for the supreme courage of their endeavor, the struggle ends, for her [Eliot’s] heroines, in tragedy, or in a compromise that is even more melancholy” (176). Unlike the “melancholy” compromise of her heroines, Eliot is able to reconcile “her feminine aspirations with the real world of
men" and, thus, "triumphant was the issue for her" (176). Yet, at the same time, Woolf justifies the way in which Eliot’s heroines remain unexceptional:

In learning they seek their goal; in the ordinary tasks of womanhood; in the wider service of their kind. They do not find what they seek, and we cannot wonder. The ancient consciousness of woman, charged with suffering and sensibility . . . seems in them to have brimmed and overflowed and uttered a demand for something . . . that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence (175).

While Woolf presents mixed feelings regarding Eliot’s questionable feminism, critics like Kate Millet are much less forgiving of Eliot’s mediocre heroines, which she makes clear in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), stating, “George Eliot lived the revolution . . . but did not write of it. She is stuck with a Ruskinian service ethic and the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman . . . [thus] Dorothea . . . can expect no more of life than the discovery of a good companion whom she can serve as secretary” (139). Similarly, in her 1972 essay, “Women, Energy, and *Middlemarch*," Lee R. Edwards speaks out against Dorothea’s pre-destined marital fate, stating:

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 . . . We could have had this vision if the author held the mirror to reflect . . . that world she forced into existence when she stopped being Mary Ann Evans and became George Eliot instead (235).

This critical comparison of Eliot to her fictional heroines is taken up by several other feminist critics including Marlene Springer, Ellen Moers, and Patricia Beer—all of whom share the belief that Eliot should have modeled her creations more on her own encounters with greatness instead of on the reality of feminine limitation.

In addition to their disappointment at how Eliot’s heroines relate or, rather, don’t relate to the author’s public triumph, feminist critics also denounce the way in which her
female characters retain a state of undistinguished ordinariness. For example, in her book, *Presumptuous Girls* (1977), Anthea Zeman writes, “We are asked to believe in the importance of a girl who seldom succeeds in doing anything of the remotest practical use” and whose history is, in a word, “uninspiring” (60). For feminists like Zeman, the key to improving the condition of women is in creating extraordinary models with which to inspire a gender-wide rebellion. However, by allowing Dorothea to remain unexceptional and unacknowledged within a common womanhood, Eliot leaves her heroine among the “hidden” and unremarkable, thus, failing to improve the position of women in the eyes of her feminist detractors.

Although Eliot’s work has been severely criticized for its unexceptional heroines, there are a number of critics who argue in defense of her feminism such as Kathleen Blake, Patricia Spacks, Jeanie G. Thomas, and Zelda Austen. Like Eliot’s supporters, I feel that she is, in fact, quite feminist in her attempt to revise history in uniquely feminine terms, placing women like Dorothea Brooke among the world’s “great” not despite but because of her gender constraints. By reading the novel as a celebration of feminine virtue and influence, it is clear that, through her spiritual grandeur and sensitivity for others, Dorothea is able to create an epos of private greatness. What the novel and a number of Eliot’s critical essays reveal is that this “Grand Old Woman of English Letters,” as Alison Booth calls her, saw a unique and inherent value in the private, unpublishable life of female domesticity. Thus, Eliot uses her fiction to elevate the common, domestic woman, and, in doing so, is able to create a new form of heroism—feminine heroism—that is grounded in an ideology of selflessness, private influence, and fellow feeling.
Eliot also recognizes that, throughout history, women have worn various culturally conditioned fetters, which they must work within in order to achieve any lasting social improvement. Accordingly, her presentation of Dorothea as ordinary and unexceptional reveals the unreality as well as the impossibility of the radical and immediate change that many feminist critics called for. In her essay “Why Feminist Critics Are Angry with George Eliot” (1976), Zelda Austen goes beyond her initial defense of Eliot, attacking the impractical nature of feminist criticism in general:

Feminist criticism, with its call for aspiring and achieving women, puts literature into similar shackles [of censorship]. The feminist’s insistence that literature show women as more than bride, wife, and mother is admirable, but it can’t be applied to novels that were written when most women were either brides, wives, mothers, or dependent spinsters—unless George Eliot had written exclusively about herself (252).

Therefore, while critics like Austen agree that Eliot’s heroines have a restricted and disappointing lot, they also understand that this limitation is intrinsically tied to the reality of Victorian experience and is not the result of anti-feminist feeling on the part of the author. Accordingly, such critics as Blake and Thomas approach the “uninspiring” nature of Eliot’s heroines from a realist’s perspective. In “Middlemarch and the Woman Question” (1976), Blake argues that the representational power of characters like Dorothea depends upon their authenticity. Thus, for Blake, it is important that Eliot “does not show her heroine summoned to sweet ascent, for surely to supply such satisfactory summons would be to endanger [her] realism,” which would, in turn, destroy her effectiveness as a representational figure.

From her realistic viewpoint, Eliot understands the gradual nature of all social change. Yet, as a number of critics rightly suggest, being a realist does not make her an anti-feminist. Instead, it strengthens her feminism by making it relevant to the actual
experience of Victorian women. Through her writing, Eliot shows that, even in her pre-
conditioned fetters, the nineteenth-century woman can have a significant impact on
public society. Thus, after achieving a healthy degree of self-love and assertion balanced
with her natural sensitivity for others, Dorothea becomes at once effective and elevated in
her ordinary womanhood. When examined in this light, *Middlemarch* is, in fact, a study
of both heroism and greatness in strikingly feminist terms; but even more so, it becomes
an affirmation of the power that resides within woman’s sympathy and
influence—making the “angel of the house” undeniably heroic.
CHAPTER II

THE FEMININE IDEAL

According to the masculine concept of heroism that dominated the Victorian age, one can only attain the gold star of "greatness" by performing individual action within the sphere of public and, thus, reportable history. Consequently, this patriarchal ideology establishes egotism and self-service as prerequisites for achieving greatness. However, for the humanist Eliot, "greatness" attempted in this way was not only invalid but also injurious to cultural progress because it denied fellow feeling and prevented any true and long-lasting improvement through collective reform. As Eliot reveals in Middlemarch, the masculine hero's selfish insistence on achieving greatness as an individual and his lack of sensitivity for others renders him ineffective and, ironically, unheroic. Accordingly, Lydgate and Casaubon are equally disappointed in their overzealous ambitions, as the "Key To All Mythologies" and the search for the "primitive tissue" prove too great for a single individual to attain. Thus, it seems that, in order to be truly effective, the masculine hero must also learn the value of having a strong fellow feeling and a sense of living collectively as one of many within the larger human community—both of which are considered "feminine" qualities and can be learned through feminine influence. To this end, Eliot advances a doctrine of "feminine" heroism, which places the interests of humanity as a whole over those of a single
individual by rejecting the desire for public acknowledgement and promoting the
dissolution of the ego. As Alison Booth suggests in the introduction of her book,
*Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, Eliot hoped that her ideal of
selfless heroism would act as an “antidote to [the] masculine egotism” that has
“conventionally fueled notions of greatness” (3). To this end, Eliot purposefully speaks
from the perspective of the social “other,” the woman, whose private existence in
domesticity gives her the invaluable virtue of selflessness for the betterment of others. In
the spirit of many Victorian reformers, Eliot believed, through their position of suffering
and sacrifice, women were able to gain a moral advantage over men.

Yet, as Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* shows us, moral awareness and selfless
heroism cannot give women cultural preeminence in the traditional masculine sense of
individual glory. Thus, instead of trying to impractically force her heroine into a male-
dominated history, Eliot emphasizes Dorothea’s ordinariness and her position within a
common and collective womanhood, much to the chagrin of radical feminists who called
for an exceptional, almost superhuman heroine to break down conventional social
barriers. With a clear understanding of the gradual nature of change that defines social
evolution, Eliot fully realizes that, in reality, the movement of women from a position of
private suppression to one of public import will be a slow and subtle process spanning a
period of decades. Accordingly, Eliot works to establish a feminine form of heroism and
influence with which to elevate women within their culturally conditioned fetters in order
to make the reality of their suppression more bearable and even glorifying. As Booth
rightly suggests, by redefining greatness as “a participation in an historical [realistic]
common life,” Eliot gives Victorian women like Dorothea a unique form of heroism
based on purely feminine terms, which, to Eliot, is far more ennobling and a much greater help to society than the masculine hero’s solitary success (7). Therefore, in her understanding of what can and cannot be achieved within the confines of traditional society, Eliot is a realistic and, as Jeanie G. Thomas suggests, a “conservative” feminist. Furthermore, it is this very conservatism that allows her to uplift and inspire women within their fettered reality.

In creating her doctrine of feminine heroism, Eliot was faced with an important question—how can one be great and, yet, be a woman too? The fact that greatness was not often associated with femininity is illustrated in Chapter 39 of the novel as Will responds to Dorothea’s ardent desire for community reform: “A man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her: nature having intended greatness for men” (389). However, by reassessing greatness in feminine terms, Eliot suggests that it is, in fact, the woman’s opposition to male ideals of ambition and egotism that makes her both heroic and great. Accordingly, a woman cannot attain feminine heroism by merely reflecting an image of masculine power; instead, the female hero must reject all desire for individual public renown and, instead, work selflessly as one of the “many Theresas” that Eliot describes in her Prelude to Middlemarch. If the feminine hero were to engage in an ambitious quest for distinction and, as Booth states, if “in attaining authority within tradition women lose their privacy . . . they may lose the virtues of their difference, violating the feminine ideal” (4). For Eliot, feminine heroism is the indirect result of anonymous altruism in which the female hero, in exchanging individual distinction for a collective identification with others, furthers the progress of the human community. Yet, while the feminine heroine is in many ways
self-sacrificing, she must also have what would appear to be a masculine sense of self and the ability to assert her own desires and concerns. Otherwise, she will be completely and unresistingly subsumed by the men in her life and, in consequence, will lose the value and effectiveness of her unique feminine influence. Thus, it is important for the female heroine to find a healthy balance between selfless love and self-love. While, as Booth states, "Feminine heroism. . .emphasizes interrelation [and] living for others," it also involves living for oneself so that the feminine can find a steady voice amid the masculine roar (133). In this way, Eliot seems to suggest that the key to both wide-ranging social reform and personal effectiveness lies in a combination of the feminine and masculine forms of heroism—joining a feminine sensitivity for others with a masculine sense of ambition—to create a more general form of "human" heroism. Accordingly, Eliot undermines a rigid separate spheres philosophy by uniting men and women under the shared banner of humanity and emphasizing their interrelatedness. Therefore, in order to be truly effective in their individual and collective heroism, men and women must learn to not just accept but to assume for themselves what is valuable in the other.

At this point, it is important to briefly examine Eliot's intellectual grounding in realist and rationalist philosophy in order to understand the nature of her criticism and the conservative way in which she approaches the subject of change. Similarly, a short survey of Eliot's various literary achievements will facilitate an appreciation of her personal role as a woman of influence. In *George Eliot: A Biography*, Gordon S. Haight discusses Eliot's early expressions of intellectual independence in her religious skepticism and nonconformist thinking. After moving to the community of Coventry in
1841, Eliot joined a group of intellectuals including the freethinking manufacturer Charles Bray. During her involvement with this group, Eliot read and was deeply influenced by a number of rationalistic works such as An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity by Charles Hennel. In fact, Eliot advances a similar rationalist philosophy in her own works with an emphasis on what is at once reasonable and real (32-36). Around this time, Eliot began her career as a translator, converting D.F. Strauss’s Das Leben Jesu from German to English, which she published anonymously in 1846. Years later, she would go on to translate Ludwig Feuerbach’s Das Wesen des Christentum or Essence of Christianity in 1854 and Spinoza’s Ethics in 1855 (135-47). Following a brief trip to the Continent in 1850, Eliot settled in London and began to write for the prestigious Westminster Review. In 1851, she became the assistant editor of the Review, which enjoyed notable success as a result of her editorial influence (45-52, 92-97).

Soon, Eliot became the center of one of London’s premier literary circles whose members included Herbert Spencer and George Henry Lewes (Eliot’s editor and future companion). In fact, Lewes was foremost in encouraging Eliot to publish her first collection of tales, Scenes of Clerical Life, which was serialized in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1858 (209-14). Just one year later, she published her first novel, Adam Bede, which was enormously popular and a brilliant success. Some of her other major works include The Mill on the Floss (1860), Silas Marner (1861), and Romola (1863). In 1871-72, Eliot published Middlemarch—a multi-plot novel that is considered her “greatest work” (444). Throughout her many novels and especially in Middlemarch, Eliot advances a belief that art should be modeled on reality rather than on other works of art. Accordingly, she is greatly interested in the internal lives of her characters and, more
importantly, how these individual characters fit within the larger web known as the human community (432-45). Even after her death in 1880, Eliot is remembered for her keen sense of reality and her genuine understanding of the human condition. Thus, as Henry James states in an 1885 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*: “What is remarkable . . . is that his quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures, without extravagance, assumption, or bravado, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such a rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multifold life of man” (qtd. in Bodenheimer 266).

In addition to her work as a novelist and translator, Eliot wrote a number of critical essays and reviews, some of which are considered to be as valuable and interesting as her fiction. In fact, Eliot’s essays often address some of the same ideas and concerns that she deals with in her later fictional works including her belief in the reality of feminine heroism. Thus, in her 1856 essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” Eliot displays a strong disapproval of ambitious women, similar to that found in *Middlemarch*, suggesting that, in their vain desire for a masculine form of greatness, these “silly ladies” actually damage the perception of womanhood as a whole. Throughout the essay, makes an unforgiving condemnation of the shallow women writers who write, not from any need of money or survival, but from a petty desire for fame, making “the final cause of their existence...that they may accompany the heroine on her ‘starring’ expedition through life” (187). Obviously, these women are not the angels of common domesticity or the “wives and daughters devoting themselves to the production of ‘copy’ out of pure heroism” (188). Instead, they are the shallow representatives of an artificial womanhood who write to fulfill a selfish desire for fame and public recognition. As Eliot best states,
“where there is one woman who writes from necessity, we believe there are three women who write from vanity” and thereby lose the virtue of a private existence (219).

Additionally, these silly lady novelists are so entirely self-centered and self-serving that they lack a true understanding of the common human condition, which forms the core of Eliot’s writing. In her essay, Eliot assaults the unconcern these ladies show toward their fellow man, claiming that they have “never talked to a tradesman except from a carriage window . . . have no notion of the working-classes except as dependants . . . [and] have no idea of feeling interest in any man who is not at least a great land proprietor, if not prime minister” (188-89). Yet, in spite of their failure to interact with the common man, the lady novelists confidently presume that they are ingrained with an astounding knowledge of human nature. As a result of this unwarranted intellectual confidence, they attempt to make profound theological and philosophical conjectures in their writing. In other words, these women believe that, on account of their minimal instruction at a fashionable finishing school and their artificial understanding of humanity, they have the reasoning ability to confound even the most dexterous minds. In regards to the novelists’ imagined intellect, Eliot makes one of her most striking criticisms of these women writers:

To judge from their writings, there are certain ladies who think that an amazing ignorance, both of science and of life is the best possible qualification for forming an opinion on the knottiest moral and speculative questions. Apparently, their recipe for solving all such difficulties is something like this: Take a woman’s head, stuff it with a smattering of philosophy and literature chopped small, and with false notions of society baked hard, let it hang over a desk a few hours every day, and serve up hot in feeble English, when not required (199).

Thus—under the pretense of worldly knowledge and human understanding—these silly lady novelists put forth the most ridiculous and presumptive philosophical theories,
which expose their inexperience "in every form of poverty except poverty of the brains" and make them both an embarrassment and detriment to the measure of female intellect (189).

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot seems to have modeled the character of Rosamond Vincy after the shallow self-service and egotistical pursuits of these silly women writers. As the novel's narrator suggests, Rosamond, like the novelists, felt that sophisticate charm was the only prerequisite for human understanding and influence: "Shallow natures dream of an easy sway over the emotions of others, trusting implicitly in their own petty magic to turn the deepest streams, and confident, by pretty gestures and remarks, of making the thing that is not as though it were" (777). In the essay, Eliot accuses the lady novelists of similar distortion, claiming that their "intellect seems to have the peculiar impartiality of reproducing both what they have seen and heard, and what they have not seen and heard, with equal unfaithfulness [Eliot's italics]" ("Silly" 189). Like the silly novelists, Rosamond has attended a local finishing school, Mrs. Lemon's, to gain social advantage and to increase her chances of marrying up. In fact, Rosamond was "the flower of Mrs. Lemon's school . . . where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female" (96). Thus, Rosamond shares a finishing school education with the silly lady novelists, and she, too, mistakes this superficial training for a real understanding of the thoughts and feelings of others.

Another connection between Rosamond and the silly lady novelists is their preoccupation with upper class society. As Eliot states in her essay, "Silly novels by lady novelists rarely introduce us into any other than very lofty and fashionable society" ("Silly" 188). Throughout the essay, Eliot scoffs at the lady novelists as they write "in
elegant boudoirs with violet-coloured ink and a ruby pen,” making absurd conjectures about the state of the world while living so far from the average human condition (189).

In the case of Rosamond, the manufacturer’s daughter is sent to Mrs. Lemon’s school for the purposes of becoming refined and fashionable, marrying well, and ascending the social ladder. Accordingly, she wishes to wed Lydgate, not because of his personal charms, but because of his family’s elevated position, which offered “vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank” (*Middlemarch* 118). In an 1854 essay entitled “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé,” written the same year that she translated Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, Eliot explains the middle-class pretension that Rosamond exhibits, stating, “The affectation that decks trivial things in fine language belongs essentially to a class which sees another above it, and is uneasy in the sense of its inferiority” (12). Like the silly novelists who disregard all who are not “great land proprietor[s], if not the prime minister,” Rosamond will not concede to marry any man unless he will elevate her social status (“Silly” 189). She even refuses to marry a Middlemarch native so as to set herself apart from and, in her opinion, above the rural neighbors. Thus, Rosamond upholds a set of inflexible stipulations for her potential suitors, which the narrator makes plain by stating:

> A stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond’s social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own: of late, indeed the construction seemed to demand that he should somehow be related to a baronet [my italics] (*Middlemarch* 118).

As Rosamond dreams of visits to her “high-bred relatives . . . whose finished manners she could appropriate as thoroughly as she had done her school accomplishments,” she also sees such visits as an opportunity to prepare herself “for the vaguer elevations which
might ultimately come" (118). Ironically, at this point in the novel, Rosamond is not yet engaged to Lydgate, but is already dreaming of the higher status that will come after their presumed marriage. Thus, in her consuming desire for an upper class station, Rosamond entertains the same preoccupation with fashionable society that the silly lady novelists present.

Finally, like the lady novelists, Rosamond is characterized by her vanity, egoism, and ambitious pursuit of public envy, which are the components of masculine heroism that Eliot bemoans. As a young girl who “was accustomed to hear that all young men might, could, would be, or actually were in love with her,” Rosamond, like most of the Middlemarchers, holds a very high opinion of her beauty and charms (167). Thus, like the silly lady novelists whose “foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print,” Rosamond has an insatiable appetite for public praise and, consequently, makes herself a visible public ornament, singing and playing the piano whenever the opportunity presents itself, in order to feed her ever-growing ego (“Silly” 218). The lady novelists and Rosamond also share a preoccupation with frivolous materialism and are overly concerned with trivialities like expensive costumes and embroidered handkerchiefs. In ridicule of Rosamond’s vain obsession with appearances, Eliot allows one of the novel’s most unassuming characters, Mary Garth, to censure Rosamond’s extravagance, sardonically stating, “I must get this sewing done. It is for Rosamond Vincy: she is to be married next week, and she can’t be married without this handkerchief” (*Middlemarch* 400). In her statement, Mary exposes Rosamond’s vain egoism and public pretension, which will, ironically, be a detriment to the married life she prepares for since Rosamond is unable to abandon her petty extravagance for a more modest life with her husband.
In her vanity and egoism, Rosamond is clearly characterized as the opposite or foil to the altruistic heroine Dorothea, who, instead of being arrogant and frivolous, is self-effacing, humble, and empathetic to others. The contrasting natures of these two characters—selfless versus selfish—is clearly illustrated in their differing responses to marital hardship. When faced with Causabon’s illness, Dorothea is filled with a genuine concern and sincere desire to help, entreatling Lydgate to “Advise me. Think what I can do?” (289). For Lydgate, this entreaty was “a cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully-illumined life” (290). Thus, Dorothea epitomizes Eliot’s feminine heroine as her immense fellow feeling and selflessness inspire a feeling of collective humanity in Lydgate. In stark opposition to this heroic ideal, Rosamond makes a passive-aggressive assault on her husband during their financial distress, emphatically stating, “What can I do?” which reveals her unwillingness to make self-sacrifice or to be a helpmate in their shared desperation (594). Instead of the aid and comfort that Dorothea longs to give Casaubon, Rosamond’s words “fell like a mortal chill on Lydgate’s roused tenderness” (594). Thus, in the face of hardship, Lydgate becomes increasingly aware of Rosamond’s self-centered nature as well as her original motive for marriage:

He had regarded Rosamond’s cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman. He was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was . . . she had seen clearly Lydgate’s preeminence in Middlemarch society, and could go on imaginatively tracing still more agreeable social effects when his talent should have advanced him . . . [thus] Lydgate was much worried, and conscious of new elements in his life as noxious to him as an inlet of mud to a creature that has been used to breathe . . . in the clearest of waters (586).
Considering the contrast between Dorothea and Rosamond, the title of Book Six, "The Widow and the Wife," takes on new significance since Dorothea, the widow, is much more suited to be a wife in her self efficacy than Rosamond, the wife, whose selfish aims and vanity make her the antithesis of Eliot's domestic heroine.

As her portrayal of Rosamond Vincy shows, Eliot disdains the woman who ambitiously pursues fame and distinction in the public world and, in turn, neglects her feminine duties as mother and wife. Instead, Eliot's ideal female hero embraces the private existence afforded to her by patriarchal society, sacrificing public renown for selfless influence. Accordingly, in the aforementioned essay, "Woman in France: Madame de Sablé," Eliot praises the seventeenth and eighteenth-century French women who, unlike the silly lady novelists, can:

Act as an amalgam to the most incongruous elements: beautiful, but not preoccupied by coquetry or passion; an enthusiastic admirer of talent but with not pretension to talent on her own part; exquisitely refined in language and manners, but warm and generous withal; not given to entertain her guests with her own compositions, or to paralyze them by her universal knowledge (10).

Furthermore, although these women did produce a number of letters and memoirs, they wrote in an unaffected, graceful way as to not taint the feminine character with masculine ambition or petty triviality. Thus, as Eliot states, "They were not trying to make a career for themselves; they thought little . . . of the public; they wrote . . . memoirs of their everyday lives . . . without any intention to prove that women could write as well as men, without affecting manly views or suppressing womanly ones" (5). While their writing focused on the private sphere of experience, these “femme précieuse,” as Eliot calls them, had a profound influence on the intellectual and literary achievements of the period. As Eliot suggests, these women had something unique and significant to contribute to both
art and literature because they, like all women, had "a class of sensations and emotions, the maternal ones, which must remain unknown to man" (4). As a result, they were admitted into serious conversation with a number of the period's great minds including Richelieu, the Great Condé, and Balzac who felt that such a natural and unimposing feminine viewpoint was worth consideration. In addition, the femme précieuse created a new style of writing according to the ordinary manner of aristocratic speech, which Eliot describes as "this undefinable mixture of the natural, the easy, and at the same time of the agreeable and supremely distinguished" (13). Thus, in contrast to the airs of importance that the silly lady novelists tried to assume with their writing, the women of seventeenth and eighteenth-century France had a significant influence on art and literature not in spite of but because of their adherence to a refined and graceful yet unpretentious feminine ideal.

In particular, the essay depicts the life and influence of one femme précieuse—Madame de Sablé—who, as Eliot suggests, represents the unexceptional, collective existence of her feminine peers and may in fact join St. Theresa as a model for Eliot's Middlemarch heroine, Dorothea Brooke. In her initial description of Madame de Sablé, Eliot states:

Perhaps there are few better specimens of the woman who is extreme in nothing, but sympathetic in all things; who affects us by no special quality, but by her entire being; whose nature has no tons criards [shril tones], but is like those textures which, from their harmonious blending of all colours, give repose to the eye, and do not weary us though we see them every day [Eliot's italics] (17).

To emphasize de Sablé's unremarkable commonness, Eliot focuses on the femme précieuse's imperfections as well as her attributes. These imperfections include de Sablé's hypochondria, her distrust of the affection of others, and her "delicate eating"
(27). But, as with Dorothea, Eliot emphasizes de Sablé’s faults in an effort not to encourage negative judgment but to heighten our understanding of her humanness and to give her the status of an “every-woman” representing a collective feminine experience. As Eliot states, “She [like Dorothea] was only one amongst a crowd—one in a firmament of feminine stars which, when once the biographical telescope is turned upon them, appear scarcely less remarkable and interesting” (45). While a cultured, cultivated woman, Madame de Sablé remains subtle in her influence and compassionate in her human fellowship, thereby corresponding to Eliot’s selfless ideal.
CHAPTER III

AN "IDEOLOGY OF INFLUENCE"

Throughout her works and especially in her portrayal of Dorothea Brooke, Eliot promotes what Alison Booth calls an "ideology of influence," which is a "belief that women have a direct line to the sources of human emotion, and that their self-sacrificing love (or . . . their interest in relationships rather than power and justice) 'mitigates the harshness of all fatalities'" (28). In other words, Eliot saw womanhood as a significant calling or mission within society rather than a disadvantage since, without the influence of feminine virtue, the masculine sin of egotism might consume all human existence. According to the ideology of influence, the "special efficacy earned by feminine self-denial" would inspire and even regenerate tenderness and compassion in their husbands, which their husbands would, in turn, use to improve the outside world through public acts of reform (Booth 154). Thus, by exercising a virtuous influence on their husbands in the private sphere of the home, women could indeed assume a meaningful, although indirect, role in the betterment of humanity. At the same time, the ideology of influence allows women to escape the conventional dichotomy of exploiting male and exploited female by giving them the power to manipulate male morality. In other words, feminine influence becomes an opposing force to masculine authority. However, since the key to the female influence was a natural virtue grounded in gentleness, tenderness, and affectionate
sympathy for others, Eliot believed that women must safeguard this virtue by maintaining 
a private existence of selfless heroism away from the taint of reckless ambition and 
selfish egoism that characterized the public world. Thus, in response to Booth’s question, 
“Can we do without the fetters that bind the feminine?” Eliot’s answer is a resounding 
“no!” (150).

Based on the idea of a uniquely feminine virtue, Eliot’s ideology of influence 
aligns with the belief that an inherent difference existed between male and female 
natures, giving women moral superiority. Accordingly, Eliot felt that women must 
accept the idea of what Booth calls “miracles in fetters,” meaning that they must use their 
cultural constraints and the superior virtue that they gain from those constraints to 
improve society through moral influence. In an 1867 letter to social critic John Morley, 
Eliot explains her belief that a woman’s social inferiority and outsider status shields her 
from the shameful egoism of the public sphere and, thus, ultimately equips her with a 
higher moral authority:

As a fact of mere zoological evolution, woman seems to me to have the 
worse share in existence. But for that very reason . . . in the moral 
evolution we have ‘an art which does mend nature’—an art which ‘itself is 
nature.’ It is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the 
harshness of all fatalities (qtd. in Booth 31).

First, the letter shows that, in Eliot’s view, women have the ability to “mend nature,” or, 
in other words, women are able to blend the differences between the sexes into a 
complementary union of private influence and public authority. Second, it reveals Eliot’s 
belief that, due to their “worse share in existence,” women gain an inherent “function of 
love” or fellow-feeling that enables them to “mitigate the harshness” and “fatalities” of 
the public world of men. In this way, private domesticity becomes a moral refuge for men
where a wife’s feminine influence is able to regenerate the moral virtue that her husband may have forfeited during the day’s public activity. In their daily, yet subtle influence on the male mind, women were able to have a meaningful effect on society without leaving their domestic sanctuary. Thus, Eliot believed that women should not simply resign to but should embrace their “peculiar constitution for a special moral influence” since “influence is more effective than power as it commands ‘unconscious acquiescence’” (44).

In a number of her critical essays, Eliot reveals an underlying belief in inherent female virtue and its corresponding influence. For instance, in “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft” (1855), Eliot praises Fuller and Wollstonecraft, both public literary figures, for continuing to possess “the beating of a loving woman’s heart, which teaches them not to undervalue the smallest offices of domestic care and kindliness” (326-27). According to Eliot, these public women are exonerated from any accusations of masculine egotism because, like Eliot, they acknowledge the value of private domesticity and the influence of “a loving woman’s heart.” In addition, Eliot provides certain quotes from both women that support her belief in a private feminine influence such as the following statement written by Margaret Fuller:

All wives, bad or good, loved or unloved, inevitably influence their husbands from the power their position not merely gives, but necessitates of colouring evidence and infusing feelings in hours when the—patient, shall I call him?—is off his guard” (328).

Fuller’s statement clearly aligns with Eliot’s ideology of influence and, accordingly, provides reputable support for that ideology. Similarly, in “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé.” Eliot praises “the women who are known rather by what they stimulated men to write, than by what they wrote themselves” (6). In this essay, Eliot also expresses the
ennobling quality of a common, domestic life with the virtuous influence that
accompanies it, stating:

The dreamy and fantastic girl was awakened to reality by the experience
of wifehood and maternity, and became capable of loving . . . a living
man, struggling with the hatreds and rivalries of the political arena; she
espoused his quarrels, she made herself, her fortune, and her influence the
stepping-stones of his ambition ("Woman" 8-9).

In this statement, Eliot’s commendation of a young girl’s transition into marital
domesticity directly reflects her belief in an ideology of influence as the loving wife
privately aids and comforts her husband in his public struggles. At the same time, the
seventeenth-century women that Eliot describes are highly influential in French public
affairs, having a collective and undeniable influence on salon life and court politics.
Thus, Eliot’s essay purposefully depicts a period of history in which private women have
a significant impact on the public world, showing how women like Madame de Sablé are
able to seamlessly connect the public and the private spheres of society.

As the aforementioned letter to Morley makes clear, Eliot’s ideology of influence
“exalts qualities that have been shaped by oppression and perhaps depend on it for their
existence” (Booth 36). For Eliot, these “exalted qualities” refer to the superior morality
of women, which allows them to have a genuine influence on society. Yet, to maintain
their unique moral authority, which is the basis of this influence, Eliot believes that
women must preserve their private domesticity and resist all temptation toward public
ambition. As Booth accurately states, “According to the logic of this view of sexual
destiny [or separate sexual natures], in attaining authority within [a masculine] tradition
women lose their privacy and they may lose the virtues of their difference, violating the
sacrificial feminine ideal” (4). To preserve “the virtues of their difference,” Eliot seems
to promote a Victorian separation of sexual spheres. By clearly dividing society into the private world of women and the public world of men, Eliot hopes to ensure that the angel of the house will remain angelic and, thus, have a positive influence on humanity as a whole. Otherwise, as Booth acknowledges and Eliot implies, "there would be no regeneration of men, nothing by harsh fatality" (32). In Eliot’s eyes, making a strict division between the public and private worlds is the only means of protecting the necessary and "innate difference" of female virtue. Accordingly, in a letter to her friend Emily Davies, a pioneer for female education, Eliot explains the importance of maintaining feminine virtue as well as her anxiety regarding women that seek public authority, and, consequently, put that virtue at risk:

There lies just that kernel of truth in the vulgar alarm of men lest women should be ‘unsexed’ [by public participation]. We can no more afford to part with that exquisite type of gentleness and tenderness [i.e., feminine virtue] ... suffusing a woman’s being with affectionateness ... than we can afford to part with human love, the mutual subjection of soul between a man and a woman—which is also a growth and revelation beginning before all history (32).

As Eliot’s letter to Davies suggests, when a woman chooses to abandon her fetters, she also, abandons her virtue, which is the basis of her essential influence.

In addition, Eliot believes that whatever feats a woman may achieve in the public sphere will never compare to the widespread good of a common and collective feminine influence. While the public woman works alone and will ultimately fall into the masculine trap of egoism, leading her to work only for herself, the virtuous women of a shared domesticity unite through their common life to form a veritable army of influence for the betterment of society. As the web metaphor in *Middlemarch* suggests, Eliot recognizes the interconnectedness of all human beings, especially the union among
women who share the conditions of a private existence. Thus, for Eliot, the domestic fetters of women are an integral part of their feminine influence for, by uniting the women who wear them, they are undoubtedly worth the miracles that these women collectively achieve.

In *Middlemarch*, Mary Garth provides an example of both the ideology of influence and the concept of performing “miracles in fetters” as her saving influence redeems Fred Vincy from his downward spiral. At the same time, Mary reveals the necessity for women to have a healthy sense of self and self love, for her unique feminine influence can only be effective when it is confidently and clearly asserted. Throughout the novel, Mary acts as a stabilizing force in Fred’s life, providing him with moral inspiration and censure. In fact, it is Fred’s professional and ethical instability that prompts Mary to choose him over the “worthier” Farebrother, which she explains in the novel’s Finale: “To be sure he [Farebrother] was [worthier]... and for that reason he could do better without me. But you—I shudder to think what you would have been—a curate in debt for horse-hire and cambric pocket-handkerchief” (*Middlemarch* 834). While Farebrother may have been her moral and emotional equal, Mary decides to wed the man who is in the greatest need of her virtuous influence in what can be considered a selfless act. However, in her selflessness, Mary still retains a great deal of self-awareness and assertiveness so that she is able to support Fred on her own terms. For example, when Fred pleads with Mary to be his wife and moral helpmate in Chapter 14, stating, “I never shall be good for anything, Mary... if you will not promise to marry me,” she refuses his advances, knowing that to marry Fred in his current state of instability would be a useless sacrifice of her future and virtue (139). Thus, in response, she tells him “If I
did love you, I would not marry you ...I think it would be wicked in me to marry you ...

My father would think it a disgrace to me if I accepted a man who got into debt, and
would not work” (139-40). With this refusal, Mary helps Fred to realize that he is
responsible for his own success or failure and that he cannot rely on her for salvation.
Therefore, Mary puts forth a “save yourself” philosophy, which will ultimately make
Fred a stronger, more independent man and will have a more lasting effect on his
character by teaching him the valuable lesson of accountability.

Yet, Mary not only encourages Fred to stabilize his life and find a steady career
but she insists that he find the right career, which ties in with the emphasis that Eliot puts
on discovering one’s self and, accordingly, one’s most suitable vocation. While Fred was
formally educated to become a member of the clergy, Mary knows that he will be
ineffective and worthless in such a sacred position. As she explains to Farebrother in
Chapter 52, Fred is so ill suited for clerical life that, as a clergyman, he will become an
object of ridicule and will place the hallowed institution that he represents at risk for
being ridiculous as well:

Fred has sense and knowledge enough to make him respectable, if he
likes, in some good worldly business, but I can never imagine him
preaching and exhorting and pronouncing blessings, and praying by the
sick, without feeling as if I were looking at a caricature. His being a
clergyman would be only for gentility’s sake and I think there is nothing
more contemptible than such imbecile gentility ... What right have such
men to represent Christianity — as if it were an institution for getting up
idiots genteelly (516).

Thus, in becoming a clergyman, Fred will not only be sacrificing his potential for
respectability, but he will also be committing an unethical act by exploiting his religion to
attain social propriety. Accordingly, Mary refuses to marry Fred if he chooses to take a
clerical position because it would make him “a piece of professional affectation” and,
therefore, useless to the public good (516). This refusal is quite meaningful for, as Farebrother states, “Fred will not take any course which would lessen the chance that you [Mary] would consent to be his wife; but with that prospect, he will try his best at anything you approve” (515). As Farebrother suggests, through the power of her refusal, Mary has an indirect influence over Fred’s occupational future since the young Mr. Vincy will not enter into any vocation without her sincere approval. However, Mary will not simply choose a career for him. Instead, Fred will have to prove his own worthy through useful action and self-initiative before she will consider his offer of marriage. In this way, Mary is able to inspire Fred’s work ethic and spark his desire to find a true vocation without dictating what that vocation should be, allowing him to gain the same self-awareness and control that makes her influence so effective.

Eliot’s most notable depiction of an ideology of influence is in her portrayal of Dorothea whose sincere human fellowship and compassionate virtue inspire moral greatness in the novel’s other characters. Accordingly, in Chapter 76, Lydgate is eased in the midst of his public scandal by Dorothea’s “trustful gravity,” which the narrator explains:

>The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character. That influence was beginning to act on Lydgate, who had for many days been seeing all life as one who is dragged and struggling amid the throng. He sat down again, and felt that he was recovering his old self in the consciousness that he was with one who believed in it [my italics]” (Middlemarch 762).

It is clear from this statement that Dorothea’s “noble nature” has altered Lydgate’s view of the world, at least momentarily, calling his attention to the “larger, quieter masses” of collective existence. As he rides away, Lydgate is in awe of Dorothea’s compassion and
selflessness and acknowledges the fact that, through these feminine qualities of virtue, she may indeed have a positive influence on the lives of men: “This young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary. She evidently thinks nothing of her own future... seems to have what I never saw in any woman before—a fountain of friendship towards men... [in fact] her love might help a man more than her money” (768-69). In this statement, Lydgate suggests that Dorothea’s sensitivity for others gives more comfort than the sum of her fortune, which is a surprising statement from a man in financial straits. Accordingly, it appears that, in this moment, Dorothea is able to inspire a humanitarian outlook in the young doctor. However, at the same time, he is still encumbered by conventionality, suggesting that fellow feeling is a strictly “feminine” quality with which women can improve the lives of men. Thus, only until men move past social convention and accept the fact that they, too, are responsible for being sensitive and compassionate to others, can Dorothea’s influence be more than momentarily effective.

In the novel’s “Finale,” Eliot makes her most obvious case for an ideology of feminine influence, as Dorothea becomes an invaluable helpmate to Will Ladislaw in his political pursuits. As the narrator states, “Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better or known better” (835). Thus, Dorothea clearly aligns with Eliot’s selfless ideal, wishing to do more, not for her own benefit but for the good of others. At the same time, what has allowed Dorothea to reach a position in which she can do more as the wife of a public man is the fact that she finally claims her own desires and achieves the kind of healthy self-love and awareness that makes
Mary Garth so effective. Thus, in admitting her romantic love for Will, Dorothea is able to exchange her former self-suppression for self-affirmation, which is the first step in finding effective influence as a politician's wife.

In addition, although Dorothea eventually marries a public man, the nature of her influence remains private and, therefore, corresponds to Eliot's belief in the value and virtue of feminine domesticity. Despite the loss of her youthful idealism and aspirations, Dorothea "never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw... Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help" (835-36). During her journey through *Middlemarch*, Dorothea progresses from having an overzealous and unrealistic vision of reform to a genuine understanding of how valuable and necessary her feminine influence is. Thus—while at the beginning of the novel she struggles with "great feelings [that]... take the aspect of error"—at the end, she realizes that, in her private marital existence, "she had now a life filled... with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself" (838, 836). Since Will has become an "ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good," Dorothea's feminine virtue is able to give him the "wifely help" of moral inspiration and elevation, which he, in turn, will take and apply in his reform efforts (836). In this way, Dorothea becomes Will's oasis of virtue and as he returns every evening from the hardships of the public world, Dorothea will be able to regenerate his sympathies, his fellow feeling, and his tender love for humanity. As Booth states, "Eliot’s Finale ask[s]... us to relinquish our attachment to the one heroine in order to
sense the fuller power of her diffused influence” (105). Thus, through her selfless influence, Dorothea is able to join the ranks of the “many Theresas” or, in this case, the “many Dorotheas,” who allow themselves to be “absorbed into the life of another,” and whose “unhistoric acts” have an “incalculably diffusive” impact on “the growing good of the world” (Middlemarch 836, 838).
CHAPTER IV

THE CONSERVATIVE FEMINIST

In their hopes that Middlemarch would become a “sacred text for a new feminist ideology” and that Dorothea would be the shining matriarch of that ideology, feminist critics across the ages have been greatly disappointed and, as a result, have accused Eliot of blatant anti-feminism (Thomas 394). However, in my opinion, Eliot is not an anti-feminist but, as mentioned earlier, a “conservative” feminist in her realistic understanding of what women can and cannot achieve during a limited period of history. While feminists believe that Dorothea should rise above conventional gender limitations and triumph in her public aspirations of reform, Eliot realizes the unreality of such an achievement as well as the complex, unpredictable, and gradual dynamics of social change. Accordingly, Eliot emphasizes the virtue of Dorothea’s ordinariness, despite a strong feminist demand for impractically exceptional heroines. In doing so, she is able to make the virtue and influence that Dorothea has as a woman more relevant and real. As Thomas states in her article, “An Inconvenient Indefiniteness: George Eliot, Middlemarch, and Feminism,” “Eliot’s sensibility is not a reforming one, if by ‘reforming’ we mean something like her critics’ often categoric rejection of the way things are, and a correspondingly aggressive effort either to secure change or to envision an ideal world” (393). Instead, Eliot leads her readers beyond the illusion of an
immediate female success story to an understanding of the real power that women possess through their ongoing domestic influence. In addition, Eliot allows her heroine to achieve a unique form of heroism, feminine heroism, as a result of the very gender constraints that the feminists bemoaned. As a conservative feminist, Eliot maintains a realistic understanding of the social limitations that face all women in Victorian society including her heroine. Thus, Dorothea tells Will Ladislaw, “I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things,” but, through her constraining marriage to Casaubon, she increasingly understands the “way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak” (Middlemarch 545). Through her recognition of female social restrictions and her understanding of the gradual nature of change throughout history, Eliot remains conservative and, thus, realistic in her feminist goals, realizing that the immediate reform that feminists called for was simply not possible. Accordingly, Eliot chooses to make “a calm plea for the removal of unjust laws and artificial restrictions, so that the possibilities of her [woman’s] nature may have room for full development” rather than join the “many over-zealous champions of women [who] assert their actual equality with men” (“Mary” 325, 333). While Eliot shares a feminist desire for gender equality, she also understands the gradual reality of change and the fact that “unjust laws and artificial restrictions” must be removed by degrees over time to have any lasting effect. At the same time, she also realizes that her best service to women is in helping them come to terms with their preconditioned social limitations. Thus, by advancing a feminine form of heroism and giving them access to power through influence, Eliot is able to elevate women within their collective position as self-sacrificing outsiders.
While Eliot is conservative in her feminism, she is no less committed than her critics to ensuring a fuller life for women through greater educational opportunity. According to Booth, Eliot endorsed a number of the proposed reforms for women's education including those of her friends Barbara Bodichon and Emily Davies. She even contributed £50 to Girton College, a female institution (45). As she suggests in “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé,” “Women become superior in France by being admitted to a common fund of ideas, to common objects of interest with men; and this must ever be the essential condition at once of true womanly culture and of true social well-being” (45). Thus, Eliot feels that, by cultivating a sound feminine intellect, women will become greater helpmates to men and will have an enhanced influence as a result of their improved understanding of society.

In addition, Eliot understands that women, like men, need to assert their feelings and ideas, but to do so effectively, they must be confident in these assertions. However, as Eliot shows in her depiction of Dorothea in Chapter 22, without a solid educational foundation, women cannot develop the self-confidence needed to be successfully assertive. During a discussion with Will on the nature of goodness, Dorothea illustrates a clear desire to assert herself as she impatiently cuts off Will’s scholarly response, exclaiming, “How can you bear to speak so lightly? . . . If it were as you say, what could be sadder than so much ardent labor all in vain? I wonder it does not affect you more painfully” (222). Yet, as the conversation continues, she pulls back from her assertions, excusing herself and admitting fault, because she lacks the confidence to oppose an educated man. In fact, she becomes “indignant with Will” for leading her to the “point of supposition,” which shows that she is insecure in the validity of her claims (222).
one might argue that Mary Garth achieves an effective form of self-assertion in the same educational circumstances as Dorothea, Mary actually is on a more stable educational footing than the novel's genteel heroine. As the text suggests, education is an important part of the Garth household as Mrs. Garth instructs various pupils from her home. Moreover, Mrs. Garth purposefully teaches from her kitchen, while doing domestic tasks, to show her students that an adequate education is just as important for women as it is for men:

She could make an excellent lather while she corrected their blunders 'without looking,' — that a woman with her sleeves tucked up above her elbows might know all about the Subjunctive Mood or the Torrid Zone — that, in short, she might possess 'education' and other good things ending in 'tion,' and worthy to be pronounced emphatically, without being a useless doll (243).

Accordingly, Mary comes from a familial background in which proper female education is given a great deal of value and emphasis. In consequence, she has a clear confidence in her knowledge and assertions. However, Dorothea does not share Mary's strong and consistent educational experience, her own being described as "narrow and promiscuous" (8). Therefore, without the confidence of a sufficient education, Dorothea must learn to trust the power of her assertions through experience, a task that spans the duration of the novel and is finally realized in her marriage to Will. However, until then, Dorothea's inadequate education and corresponding lack of confidence put her at the mercy of masculine ideology despite her efforts at self-education, as Thomas rightly suggests:

Instead of expanding her sense of the scope of public action and strengthening her confidence in her own knowledge and judgment, her nibblings at Latin and Greek and the geography of Asia Minor leave her depressed about the arduous slow process of learning, and less sure than ever about worldly affairs. As a result, she grows increasingly dependent on the men in her life . . . for guidance on matters that seem to her to belong firmly to the 'provinces of masculine knowledge' (401).
Thus, as a result of the insufficiency of female education, women are at risk for being subsumed by a masculine viewpoint, which, as mentioned earlier, would diminish the value of their uniquely feminine influence.

In addition to her concerns regarding female dependency, Eliot also fears that insufficiently educated women will exchange their compassionate virtue for frivolous vanity, converting their feminine influence from a positive to negative. Recalling her ideology of influence, Eliot feels that women should have a positive and beneficial influence on men through their feminine virtue and human understanding. However, Eliot realizes that, without adequate educational opportunities, women are at risk for wasting their innate virtue in shallow idleness and vanity. Accordingly, in “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft,” Eliot calls attention to the fact that men suffer greatly at the hands of female ignorance:

> Men pay a heavy price for their reluctance to encourage self-help and independent resources in women. The precious meridian years of many a man of genius have to be spent in the toil of routine, that an ‘establishment’ may be kept up for a woman who can understand none of his secret yearnings, who is fit for nothing but to sit in her drawing-room like a doll-Madonna in her shrine (332).

Clearly, Eliot has this “doll-Madonna” figure in mind in her presentation of Rosamond who, like the women Eliot describes in her essay, hinders Lydgate’s genius from reaching its full potential. In fact, Lydgate calls Rosamond his “basil-plant” since the basil is a plant “which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains” (*Middlemarch* 835). The entire scope of Rosamond’s education at Mrs. Lemon’s finishing school is superficial and impractical, cultivating talents like “propriety of speech,” “musical execution,” and “the getting in and out of a carriage” (96). Ironically, the shallow instruction that Rosamond receives at Mrs. Lemon’s school—which she hopes will
ensure a favorable marriage—ultimately makes her husband's life troublesome and weary instead of easier.

Even more ironic is the fact that Rosamond is exactly the type of woman that Lydgate wants for a wife, which is part of Eliot's critique against the society that breeds women to be frivolous and vain. While men continue to desire women like those produced at Mrs. Lemon's school, women like Rosamond will continue to be professionally and financially detrimental to their husbands according to the basic tenets of supply and demand. As Eliot suggests in her censure of the "silly lady novelists,"

"Society is a very culpable entity, and has to answer for the manufacture of many unwholesome commodities, from bad pickles to bad poetry" to silly ladies as well (219).

In his description of Rosamond in Chapter 16, Lydgate is obviously a participant in the social system that encourages the production of shallow women for wives:

Certainly, if falling in love had been at all in question, it would have been quite safe with a creature like this Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman—polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence. Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys (164).

For Lydgate, the principle function of a wife is adornment, which makes him, as Eliot suggests in "Madame de Sablé," a "most ardent admirer of feminine shallowness" (44).

Thus, in the purely aesthetic nature of her charms, Rosamond makes an excellent spousal candidate in an economy of feminine ornamentation. Trained for life as a decorative commodity, Rosamond is not just fully aware of the fact that Lydgate is only interested in her outward appearance, but she is even prepared for such a superficial judgment, which
becomes clear during their first meeting at Stone Court: “Every nerve and muscle in
Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by
nature an actress of parts that entered into her physique: she even acted her own
character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own [Eliot’s italics]”
(117). As this statement suggests, Rosamond is so caught up in artifice that she loses any
true sense of self. Therefore, in choosing Rosamond on the value of her superficiality,
Lydgate is as much if not more to blame for the burdensome nature of his marriage—a
burden that will continue as long as men like Lydgate value the external charms of
women over their internal virtue.

As a result of her stunted intellect, Rosamond cannot truly understanding the
workings of the world and, more importantly, cannot empathize with her husband’s
private as well as public struggles. Thus, during the young couple’s financial trouble, the
novel’s narrator states, “It seemed that she [Rosamond] had no more identified herself
with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests”
(597). Unlike Dorothea who grows insecure as a result of her educational shortcomings,
Rosamond develops a foolish and unwarranted confidence in her opinions and becomes a
burden rather than a helpmate to Lydgate. As Eliot states, “so far as obstinacy is
concerned, your unreasoning animal is the most unmanageable of creatures” (“Margaret”
329). Clearly, in her disobedience to Lydgate’s every wish and order, Rosamond is both
obstinate and unmanageable and becomes what Eliot calls “an impracticable yoke-
fellow” (329). In fact, in Chapter 43 the narrator reveals that Rosamond is not only an
unmanageable companion but also, and more alarmingly, a conqueror of Lydgate and
defeater of his aims:
Rosamond felt herself beginning to know . . . that women, even after marriage, might make conquests and enslave men...vanity, with a woman’s whole mind and day to work in, can construct abundantly on slight hints, especially on such a hint as the possibility of indefinite conquests (Middlemarch 436).

While this passage directly refers to Rosamond’s hope of “conquering” Will Ladislaw, it foreshadows her future conquest and, consequently, destruction of Lydgate’s public aspirations and private purposes. After Rosamond disobeys him in writing to Sir Godwin, Lydgate realizes her ruthless obstinacy as well as his enslavement in her shallow designs, stating, “You have always been counteracting me secretly. You delude me with a false assent, and then I am at the mercy of your devices” (Middlemarch 665). In spite of her lack of a proper education, Rosamond is still able to exert a powerful, however negative, influence over Lydgate’s life as well as his public perception. Thus, Lydgate ironically and quite appropriately falls victim to the very incompetence and frivolity that he initially desired in a wife, joining the many men who, in Eliot’s view, are “in a state of subjection to ignorant and feeble-minded women” as a result of insufficient female education (“Margaret” 327).

Finally, it is important to note that the shallow nature of Rosamond’s education places “the flower of Mrs. Lemon’s school” in direct opposition to Eliot’s ideology of influence (Middlemarch 96). During the course of the novel, Rosamond becomes an increasing burden to Lydgate until his final realization and resolution in Chapter 81: “Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully” (800). In this scene, there is an inversion of the traditional gender differences that Eliot supports as Lydgate, the public man, becomes the
compassionate, self-sacrificing spouse and Rosamond, the private wife, selfishly requires her husband’s care. However, as was discussed earlier and reinforced above, this is exactly the companion that Lydgate “had chosen,” not in spite but because of her shallowness and vanity. Even in her burdensome frailty, she seems no less attractive to Lydgate. Rosamond also opposes Eliot’s ideology of influence in being a detriment rather than an inspiration to her husband’s public action:

He [Lydgate] had meant everything to turn out differently; and others had thrust themselves into his life and thwarted his purposes. His marriage seemed an unmitigated calamity; and he was afraid of going to Rosamond . . . lest the mere sight of her should exasperate him and make him behave unwarrantably . . . Only those who know the supremacy of the intellectual life . . . can understand the grief of one who falls from that serene activity into the absorbing soul-wasting struggle with worldly annoyances” (737).

Instead of being a source of moral elevation for her husband, Rosamond becomes the most galling “worldly annoyance” in Lydgate’s life. Yet, here again the situation is complicated as Lydgate is as much responsible as Rosamond for filling his life with “unmitigated calamity” through his participation in an ornamental marriage market. The fact that “the mere sight of her [could] exasperate him and make him behave unwarrantably” suggests that he is sickeningly aware but unable to admit his own responsibility in this marital affliction. Throughout their marriage, the couple’s shared vanity creates a morally damning environment that destroys the private sanctuary of virtuous domesticity. Thus, since Lydgate chooses to marry Rosamond based on the value of her shallow education, he is greatly hindered in both his public pursuits and private morality, which reveals that such a superficial feminine influence is, in fact, poisonous rather than productive.
While Eliot recognizes the need for greater educational opportunities for women, she also has a realistic tolerance for the gradual process that leads to lasting change. As she states in “Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft,” “There is a perpetual action and reaction between individuals and institutions; we must try and mend both little by little—the only way in which human things can be mended” (333). In recognizing the slow nature of human evolution, Eliot understands the need for women to come to terms with their limited influence and to appreciate the unique virtue that their private existence affords. Eliot bemoans the fact that many “overzealous” feminists, in envisioning what women may become, fail to notice the value of what they already are. By elevating the “little employments” and “private plans” of women to a status of heroism, Eliot is able to soften the limitations of the feminine condition. In addition, while Eliot sees that, with greater educational and vocational opportunities, some women will exchange private influence for public pursuits, she also believes that many women will choose to remain in their domestic and maternal sanctuaries. Quoting Margaret Fuller, Eliot’s essay states: “If you ask me what offices they (women) may fill, I reply—any . . . [but] I have no doubt, however, that a large proportion of women would give themselves to the same employments as now, because there are circumstances that must lead them” (330-31). The “circumstances” seem to refer to the selfless virtue and fellow feeling that Eliot ascribes to inherent female nature. As stated earlier, Eliot understands the importance of gender difference to preserve woman’s moral influence and, in “Woman in France: Madame de Sablé,” she states:

A certain amount of psychological difference between man and woman necessarily arises out of the difference of sex, and, instead of being destined to vanish before a complete development of woman’s intellect and moral nature, will be a permanent source of variety and beauty, as
long as the tender light and dewy freshness of morning affect us differently from the strength and brilliancy of the midday sun (4).

Thus, it seems that Eliot’s greatest fear concerning female education is that women will be forced into a mold of masculine mentality and will consequently lose the value of their “difference.” Instead, Eliot hopes that advanced education for women will promote mutual understanding and lead to a complementary “marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of human happiness” (46). In short, while Eliot supports the various movements for greater female education, especially as a means to ensure a more confident and positive feminine influence, her primary goal is to elevate women within their fettered reality—a reality which she knows will be slow in change—to a position of both moral and social import and, in so doing, is quite the feminist.

Throughout her writing, Eliot strives to give greater currency to private experience as it relates to and influences the public world. As Booth rightly states, “One of the greatest benefits of feminist analysis has been to provoke readers to storm the mental barricades that separate history and the political world, to challenge… the priority of public politics over private, or even to challenge the clear distinction between what is public and what is private” (24). Clearly, Eliot’s works are among these “feminist analyses” as they reveal the undeniable significance that woman’s private influence has on public history. In her epistolary essay *Three Guineas*, Eliot’s literary successor Virginia Woolf joins her precursor in recognizing that there is indeed commerce between the spheres:

The public and private worlds are inseparably connected... we [women] are not passive spectators doomed to unresisting obedience but by our thoughts and actions can ourselves change that [public] figure. A common
interest unites us; it is one world, one life. How essential it is that we should realize that unity... For such will be our ruin if you in the immensity of your public abstractions forget the private figure, and if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world (142).

Woolf, like Eliot, understands the complementary relationship between men and women, despite their separate spheres of existence. Confined to a life of private domesticity, women develop a unique outsider's influence and, accordingly, are able to maintain their feminine virtue by staying outside of the corrupt public world. Thus, both Eliot and Woolf reject the traditional prioritizing of the public over the private based on the subtle, yet undeniable effect that women have on the social evolution of the world.

In her presentation of both Dorothea and Rosamond, Eliot reveals how great an impact, whether positive or negative, women have on the fates of men. Nowhere is this more apparent than in their very different influences on the same man—Lydgate. Dorothea, through her self-sacrificing nature and attentiveness to others, is able to ease some of the doctor's financial and social distress while Rosamond, in her ignorant vanity, lies at the root of this distress. Yet, at the same time, Dorothea's positive influence and saving grace allows Lydgate to see the disappointing nature of his own marriage, which he is responsible for in marrying for superficial reasons. As Lydgate comes to realize, Rosamond's shallow egotism, fostered by a marriage market based on feminine appearance, provides no moral or spiritual fortification. Instead, the power of her influence becomes negative, and, instead of keeping him from unethical behavior, she plays a significant role in pushing him to it. Thus, in the Raffles affair, Lydgate accepts Mr. Bulstrode's money, which is in fact a bribe, and, although he does not openly recognize the corrupt nature of the act, he alludes to an unconscious awareness of his crime: "It appeared to him a very natural movement in Bulstrode that he should have
reconsidered his refusal... But as he put his hack into a canter... there crossed his mind, with an unpleasant impression... that he should be overjoyed at being under a strong personal obligation" (Middlemarch 707). Despite his "unpleasant" feelings, Lydgate must accept Bulstrode's money, even if a bribe, in order to appease Rosamond's vanity and to support his own frivolous spending, which he let get out of control in trying to maintain social appearances. Thus, Rosamond's influence does not alleviate but, in fact, contributes to Lydgate's public impropriety so that, at a time when she should be inspiring a sense of morality and virtue, she feeds his indiscretion.

Regarding the same affair of Raffles' death and Lydgate's questionable bribe, Dorothea is able to counter Rosamond's negative influence on the young doctor with her overwhelming virtue and human fellowship. After hearing of his misfortune and his persecution in the eyes of the Middlemarch community, Dorothea expresses her absolute faith in his innocence which "was something very new and strange in his [Lydgate's] life that these few words of trust from a woman should be so much to him" (762). Dorothea's show of support and confidence means so much to Lydgate because these qualities are lacking in his relationship with Rosamond. In fact, this is the first time that Lydgate has had the virtue of selfless femininity to lean upon, which allowed him to "give himself up for the first time in his life, to the exquisite sense of leaning entirely on a generous sympathy, without any check of proud reserve" (763). According to human nature, when someone believes in our infallible goodness, we naturally want to live up to that presumed goodness in the reality of our actions. Such is the case with Dorothea and Lydgate. Though her unfaltering faith in Lydgate's innocence and integrity, Dorothea inspires Lydgate to raise himself to the level of her praise. She is also able to rescue
Lydgate from any questionable obligation to Bulstrode by generously offering her financial assistance. In this way, Dorothea is able to supply the positive feminine influence that Lydgate lacks; however, this inspiration is only temporary as the doctor returns to a life based on superficiality and a wife chosen on the grounds of her frivolity, becoming a gout doctor for the wealthy. Thus, in her positive influence over Lydgate, Dorothea illustrates the valuable impact that private women can have on the life of public men by providing them with “generous sympathy,” moral inspiration, and, at times, even material needs. Yet, for this influence to have lasting power, it must be continually renewed and restored, which Rosamond, in her shallow vanity, cannot accommodate.

Finally, in any analysis of Eliot’s questioned feminism, it is important to discuss the fact that Eliot does allow Dorothea to defy social order, although modestly, through her independent choice to marry Will Ladislaw. While not the grandiose triumph that the feminist critics are looking for, a rebellious marriage is the only realistic avenue of self-declaration open to women like Dorothea during this period of history. As Thomas states, “The choice to marry, however conventional, if the very fact of marriage is taken as all defining, is also the protest that it is within her power to make against the existing structure of things” (408). Therefore, in marrying Will despite her family’s objections, Dorothea finally achieves the self-realization and assertion that she has been searching for throughout the novel. As a result of this newfound sense of self, Dorothea is able to have an effective influence on the public world through her private heroism. By giving Will “wifely help” in his struggles for social reform, Dorothea has a subtle and, yet, very real impact on society as the driving force behind her husband’s public action. In this way, Dorothea’s influence illustrates the same “kind of modest, indirect, incalculable
influence that, in George Eliot's view, slowly transforms the world” (Thomas 409).

While feminist critics disregard the reality of experience for women in the Victorian age, demanding an idealistic female success story, Eliot understands the limits of this reality as well as the importance of it. Thus, Eliot acknowledges the value of the common woman whose self-sacrificing virtue and widespread fellow feeling creates the private heroism and collective influence by which the world evolves.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

While George Eliot’s questionable feminism is still a complex and debatable issue, I feel that Eliot is indeed a feminist, for—although Dorothea Brooke never attains the individual acclaim of a modern-day Saint Theresa—she is able to carve out a position of significant influence as one of an infinite many. From her realistic viewpoint, Eliot understands the gradual nature of social change, recognizing that the limited position of women in Victorian society will likely subsist for a number of years to come as it has for a number of years before. Accordingly, Eliot realizes that the greatest service she can do for women in the nineteenth-century is to elevate them within their fettered reality, giving value to their collective form of heroism and influence. Thus, Eliot can be called a “conservative feminist” in that she rejects the validity of radical and unrealistic reform and, instead, helps women to come to terms with the reality of their experience by making that experience at once meaningful and ennobling.

In spite of a strong feminist call for exceptional and almost superhuman heroines, Eliot emphasizes Dorothea ordinariness in order to align her with a common, Victorian womanhood and to make her a realistic model for actual feminine existence. In doing so, she creates a heroine who the average woman can at once relate to and appreciate. At the same time, Eliot allows her heroine’s unexceptional and unacknowledged state to be an
uplifting force by which all women in a similar reality can achieve a unique form of heroic greatness. In contrast to the traditional gendering of greatness as masculine, Eliot puts forth a new and strictly feminine form of heroism based on the unique virtues that women are culturally conditioned to possess. These attributes include a distinct moral superiority, a strong sensitivity and fellow feeling for others, and a sense of living within a collective and cooperative human community. Therefore—unlike masculine heroes who are characterized by egotism, individualism, and self-serving ambition—female heroines achieve a private but invaluable form of greatness by placing the interests of humanity above the interests of the individual. In fact, Eliot feels that, in order to be truly affective in his public aims, the male hero must learn to value and incorporate qualities of feminine heroism into his own attempts at greatness. As she reveals through the frequent failure of the Middlemarch men, attempts at public action are fruitless without a sense of sympathy for the larger human community for, without such sympathy, one cannot understand the wants and needs of his or her fellow man. In addition, by insisting on independent individuality, these male “heroes” alienate themselves from the necessary aid and encouragement of others.

Throughout Middlemarch, Eliot constructs an ideology of feminine influence in which women, through their natural virtue and fellow feeling, have a significant impact on the public world of men. In this way, Eliot unites the public and private spheres in a complementary relationship, calling for men and women to join together under the common banner of humanity. While Eliot understands the need for the public action and ambition of men, she also sees the necessity of the moral inspiration and virtuous influence that women provide. Thus, as she best states in the final sentence of
Middlemarch, “The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs” (838). Yet, by giving value to these private lives in her public form of literature, Eliot is able to memorialize the unknown many, raising them to a heroic status not for a single show of greatness but for the invaluable influence of their daily acts.
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