

A Feminist Approach to *Middlemarch*

—On Dorothea's Second Marriage—

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I.

As Alan Mintz suggests, George Eliot's use of vocation as a subject in *Middlemarch* (1871) is very original.¹⁾ This work becomes not romance of love, but romance of vocation. But Dorothea, frustrated by the inhibiting conditions of Middlemarch society and by her own "spots of commonness," gives up her pursuit of vocation and seems happy to sink into her second marriage to Will Ladislaw.

Many feminist critics object to this second marriage. Lee R. Edwards is disappointed with the novel's failure to fulfil its opening chapters' "promise of a new spiritual incarnation, possibly even an entirely new creation." She says that "what I had seen as revolution was in fact reaction...it [*Middlemarch*] no longer be one of the books of my life. In so seeing, I am alternately angered, puzzled, and finally depressed."²⁾ Edwards' statements reflect many feminist critics' frustrations with the novel.

What I try to do in this paper is to examine briefly the problems of Dorothea's second marriage in relation to the romance of vocation.

II.

Since Virginia Woolf contrasted Eliot's "triumphs" with the "melancholy compromise" of her heroines, other recent feminist critics have thought about this connection. Ellin Ringler's question ("why, when Eliot herself was able to defy social tradition and achieve her own epic life, did she relentlessly consign Dorothea to the unmitigated mediocrity of a conventional marriage to Will Ladislaw?")³⁾ represents opinions of feminist critics as Lee R. Edwards and Ellen Moers et al. Even the defenders of Eliot's feminism agree that Dorothea's life is a disappointing lot. Zelda Austen agrees that Eliot "did not

1) Alan Mintz, *George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), See Ch. 3 *Middlemarch: The Romance of Vocation*. pp.53-71.

2) Lee R. Edwards, "Women, Energy, and *Middlemarch*," *Woman: An Issue*, Edited by Lee R. Edwards, Mary Heath and Lisa Baskin (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and company), p.224, 238.

However, besides elements of hope of "an entirely new creation," Dorothea's frustration is suggested in "the inconvenient indefiniteness" and "foundress of nothing" (p.26) of "Prelude," and "A new Theresa" without "the medium" (p.896) of "Finale."

3) Ellin Ringler, "*Middlemarch: A Feminist Perspective*," *Studies in the Novel*, 1983. Spring 15(1) p.57.

permit Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* to do what George Eliot did in real life." Austen attributes the limitations of Eliot and other nineteenth century female writers to "her fidelity to the actual," in other words, "Eliot's sense of nineteenth-century limitations on women". Eliot doesn't allow Dorothea an opportunity of self-achievement like herself, in Austen's words, "because she was a genius, one in a thousand, and Dorothea was not." Austen defends Eliot by mentioning that "realistically [common] Dorothea was far more representative than [uncommon] George Eliot" in that Eliot is "the most anxious [novelist] to penetrate and understand the workings of minds alien to her own."⁴ Ruth Bernard Yeazell criticized the expectations of the unrealistically strong heroines by mentioning that "the danger for feminist critics lies in conflating life and art."⁵ Kathleen Blake agrees with Ruth Yeazell, especially, "when she [Ruth Yeazell] chides critics for expecting literary pictures of strong women succeeding in a period that did not make them likely in life."⁶ Jeanie G. Thomas also supports Yeazell and Blake, when she defends Eliot by commenting "what is not revolution is not automatically reaction." She argues that "their [feminist critics' like Edwards] demand seems grounded in a stubborn desire for literature that contradicts what our lives confirm."⁷ Most of these critics think the demands of Eliot's heroines are very unrealistic, and suggest the danger to confuse life with art.

I believe that Eliot might acutely have perceived the way she was viewed because of her achievement, which was a rare self-fulfilment as a woman in the Victorian period. Her 'anxiety of authorship'⁸ and her extreme fear of criticism of her works prove her conflicts. She may prefer dealing with a common heroine for this reason. The separation of Eliot from Dorothea can be justified when considering the above comments.

Now let's examine in some detail the problems of Dorothea's second marriage and the romantic ending of the novel. This second marriage is at least better than the first. As Joan Bennett comments, Dorothea's second marriage is an improvement on the first, because "its basis is an appreciation of the man as he is; their love for each other comprises mutual sympathy, understanding and respect."⁹ Besides, when Dorothea gives up her fortune under

4) Zelda Austen, "Why Feminist Critics Are Angry With George Eliot." *College English*, Vol. 37, No. 6, February 1976. pp.549-561. Especially see p.549, 550, 552, 553, 557.

5) Ruth Benard Yeazell, "Fictional Heroines and Feminist Critics."

6) Kathleen Blake, "*Middlemarch* and the Woman Question." *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, Vol. 31, December 1976. p.310.

7) Jeanie G. Thomas, "An Inconvenient Indefiniteness: George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, and Feminism." *Univ. of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 56 (1986, 1987) p.393, 405.

8) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic (The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination)* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979) See ch. 2 Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship in part I. Toward a Feminist Poetics pp.45-92 and part V. pp.443-535.

9) Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1962), p.176.

Casaubon's will to marry Will, it implies Dorothea's bravery to rebel against the repressive society that is run by inheritance. Though Dorothea does not rebel for the radical revolution of society itself, but for her individual happiness, this act suggests her active pursuit of fulfilment.

Nonetheless, Dorothea's second marriage causes dissatisfaction among many feminist critics. Zelda Austen's expression that "she [Dorothea] could not be an M.P. but she could be an M.P.'s wife,"¹⁰⁾ summarizes their dissatisfaction. Dorothea's two marriages are characterized both by her dreams and frustrations and by a choice of possible alternatives. Though Dorothea desires "epic life" like Theresa, she has no other choices except the life of marriage or that of a spinster, because "these later-born Therasas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul."¹¹⁾ She tries to achieve this longing through her marriage to a husband with a high ideal. Since this is the only way that she can make her dreams come true, the means of her achievement cannot be blamed, though her first choice of a spouse may be wrong. Dorothea seeks for a husband as "a sort of father" [who] "could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it." (p.32) Gilbert and Gubar criticized Dorothea's view of marriage itself, "she[Eliot] describes a marriage of death initiated not by rape but by female complicity.... The 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."¹²⁾ Dorothea's portrait of Casaubon as a modern Milton proves an illusion; he is at most an egoistic pedant.

After Dorothea's disenchantment with her first marriage, her change is expected. Though she lets us expect her self-achievement through her vocation, she only marries another man, when freed by Casaubon's death. Many readers are disappointed by this transfer of Dorothea's idealistic energy from the larger world to the lesser man.

This second marriage raises the question of Will as an appropriate character and spouse. Many critics criticize Will as a slight character and as an inadequate spouse for his impressive wife, because he is an extremely idealized character.¹³⁾ For instance, John Hutcheson regards "the irony of the book" as "the unreality of Will" and mentions that Will is "a deliberately romantic creation, carefully separated from what is otherwise a realistic portrayal of a particular society."¹⁴⁾ In fact, he seems to be "a sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class", (p.502) and is seen as an "agitator" (p.527) to Middlemarch society because he is created outside Middlemarch society and is introduced to the society.

10) Zelda Austen, p.553.

11) George Eliot, *Middlemarch*(Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965) p.25. Further references to page number in this edition will appear in the text.

12) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, pp.505-506.

13) We can mention the criticisms of Henry James, Walter Allen, Jerome Thale ...and etc.

14) John Hutcheson, "Subdued Feminism: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot." *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 1983 May-June 6(3) p.251.

Therefore, any discussion of Dorothea's final destiny should consider her husband's work as well as his character.

Will became *an ardent public man*, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days, and getting at last returned to Parliament by constituency who paid his expense. 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*. (p.894, my italics)

Describing Will as "an ardent public man" is very important in relation to the setting of this story. *Middlemarch* takes place in a provincial society just before the passage of the First Reform Bill of 1832. When Will works for its passage, her "wifely help" is the indirect fulfilment of part of her original dream to help someone who do great works. This marriage is not a purpose itself, but a means to pursue the better life. Though John Halperin criticizes "she is a woman who needs a man,"¹⁵ he does not consider the reason why she needs a man. The more important reason why she needs a man is to make sure of her own powers to serve others for herself.

All defenses of her second marriage are focused on her "wifely help" to Will as a public man. Those critics who defend her second marriage regard her wifely help as a partial fulfilment of her dream, or a possible best. When Will is considered in relation to his work as an "ardent public man," Dorothea's partial achievement through her wifely help is positively affirmed. Mildred S. Greene states, "Eliot seems to mean that *she lived through others, her husband and her children*, shaping them to her ideas of service rather than interacting directly with her society." And she adds that "Dorothea finds in marriage to Will the contribution she was prevented from making alone."¹⁶ Ellin Ringler's final conclusion that "she comes to exert a significant influence over the man she is close to, but on a private, psychological level, rather than a public, social one,"¹⁷ also justifies this second marriage.

But as Edwards points out, "we know he would reform, but what and how we know not, we know that Dorothea would help him, but don't know the exact nature of her help."¹⁸ There still remains a disturbing fact that Will's work and her 'wifely help' are not concrete.

Dorothea's second marriage raises important questions concerning the marriage-plot for the traditional nineteenth century heroine and, in addition, forces us to examine the way

15) John Halperin, *Egoism and Self-Discovery in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974), p.155.

16) Mildred S. Greene, "Another Look at Dorothea's Marriages," *Literature and Psychology* V. 33(1987) No. 1, p.39. my italics.

17) Ellin Ringler, "*Middlemarch*: A Feminist Perspective." *Studies in the Novel*. 1983. Spring 15(1), p.58.

18) Lee R. Edwards, p.235.

recent feminist criticism has dealt with so-called "romantic endings." Most feminist critics frown upon the romantic ending of marriage. Kate Millett is typical when she comments on Dorothea's second marriage in her *Sexual Politics*:

Dorothea's predicament in *Middlemarch* is an eloquent plea that a fine mind be allowed an occupation; but it goes no farther than petition. She marries Will Ladislaw and can expect no more of life than the discovery of a good companion whom she can serve as secretary.¹⁹⁾

Edward also objects to the marriage ending of this work: "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."²⁰⁾

Rachel Blau Duplessis explains this dissatisfaction with the ending of the marriage by stating that the traditional "rightful end" of women in the novels was social, successful courtship, marriage or judgemental of her sexual and social failure, death. In the nineteenth century fiction dealing with women, successful quest and romance could not coexist and be integrated for the female protagonist at the resolution. The plot of courtship as social and gender reconciliation begins to break in the later nineteenth century. The contradiction between love and vocation in plots centering on women is accentuated.²¹⁾ That is, the heroine's marriage-end, which all conflicts of love and vocation have been reconciled and resolved, no longer give readers satisfaction. This ending seems to be a paradox because the heroine who challenged marriage and pursued her own vocation, is self-satisfied with her marriage at the end. The vocation [quest] plot and love plot don't seem to coexist; and that one submits to the other in the end seem to be an inconsistent paradox. Kenny Marotta accurately describes this apparent paradox by mentioning "while *Middlemarch* puts forth the claims of egoistic ambition [of vocation], Mintz argues, it finally affirms the traditional novelistic virtues of altruism [through Dorothea's marriage.]"²²⁾

What makes Victorian women writers including Eliot end with heroine's marriage, or more concretely, the triumph of love or marriage plot over vocation plot after the contradiction of both demands? First, I can think about mid-Victorian women writers' duality of outlook of marriage. Though they see actual restrictions of marriage, they let their novel end with the marriage on account of their sense of reality which is the demands of publishers and circulating libraries.²³⁾ In brief, they are conscious of the

19) Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*(Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), p.139.

20) Lee R. Edwards, p.235.

21) Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending(Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers)* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press) p.13, p.15.

22) Kenny Marotta, "Middlemarch: The "Home Epic," *Genre* 15 1982 Winter 15(4), p.403.

23) Shirley Foster, "Female Januses: Ambiguity and Ambivalence towards Marriage in Mid-Victorian Women's Fiction," *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 1983 May-June 6 (3), p.219.

demands of tradition and readers and of book sales. John Hutcheson calls the nineteenth century women writers' works "subdued feminism" in this sense,²⁴⁾ and his statement seems to be right in relation to their dual attitude. Secondly, we can think about the use of marriage as a device necessary to fictional structure, or as a symbol of fulfilment and completeness. Ruth Yeazell comments "the marriage is most significant as a social ritual" because "fictional marriages have traditionally enacted this union of self and other, and have thus resolved the tension between the individual and the larger human community."²⁵⁾ Foster states that "She [Eliot] also uses marriage as a structural principle in another way to suggest that it may offer a rewarding and fulfilling finality."²⁶⁾ Both these comments consider marriage as a fictional device necessary to the ending of a novel; they are somewhat convincing.

However, it is followed by the recognition that not every heroine should have to conclude her career with marriage or with death. We can find such a thought in this work, too.

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done—not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw. (p.894)

As is reflected in this passage, nobody knows what outlet is possible to Dorothea, though many regret her marriage. Eliot seems to be aware of the contradiction between conventional woman's virtue of renunciation and the demands of vocation, but she herself could not find any other alternatives except the marriage ending.

We can possibly assume that this marriage ending is neither Eliot's final ending nor final judgement, but a temporary ending. She says that "marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning." (p.890) And somewhere else she sees marriage as "the beginning of the home-epic." (p.891) Besides, this marriage ending reflects Eliot's perception of limitations imposed on contemporary women. Such limitations come partly from the lack of the experience to make the right choice and lack of education by imperfect social state.

A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know. (p.896)

Here she sees the limitation of many women's lives similar to Dorothea's as well as of

24) John Hutcheson, see. pp.230-257.

25) Ruth Bernard Yeazell, p.34,37.

26) Shirley Foster, p.222.

Dorothea's. I agree with Kathleen Blake who supports the small number of critics including R.H. Hutton; "it is *"the meanness of opportunity"* and intrinsic suitability, which determines Dorothea's second comparatively happy marriage."²⁷⁾

Unlike Maggie Tulliver of *The Mill on the Floss*, Dorothea survives. Maggie could not compromise with society and her final attempted rescue of her brother is doomed to failure. In contrast, Dorothea seems to be integrated into society because she can, in fact, reach a point of compromise with the established order. However, we can perceive Eliot's thought about amelioristic social change in her works: her comment in *Felix Holt*, "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" and her thinking about "diffusive" "effect"—the growing good of the world by "unhistoric acts" and by "the number who lived faithfully a hidden life." (p.896) This kind of modest, indirect, "diffusive" influence, slowly changes the world in Eliot's view.

III.

In summary, I have discussed two issues of *Middlemarch* that many feminist critics are concerned about: 1) the relation between George Eliot and her heroines, especially Dorothea Brooke, and 2) the problem of Dorothea's second marriage to Will, and the romantic marriage ending of the novel. This work concretely describes the tension between the two demands of a love plot and a vocation plot. Even Ringler who defends Eliot's feminism, concludes that Eliot is an "uncertain feminist" with a complex ambivalence toward the contemporary lot of women. Ringler argues that "Eliot seems, at the very last, to shrink from the implications of her own world," though Eliot draws "Saint-Theresa Syndrome," that is, "female fate of desiring an epic life but finding no outlet for achievement apart from the socially limiting role of 'common womanhood,' i.e., marriage"²⁸⁾ While Ringler's comment is right in relation to her ambivalent attitude towards women's issues, a description of tension itself may be regarded as one of her achievements.

Consequently, when the definition of feminist is qualified to mean the perception and sympathetic expression of contemporary women's repression and of the tension between the romance of love and the romance of vocation, Eliot can be called a feminist and a realist in the best sense. As Jeanie G. Thomas succinctly points out, "she[Eliot] is profoundly feminist—in her insight into the restrictions on women's development and the complex social and psychological dynamics that maintain those restrictions, and in her feeling for the human waste and suffering often thereby engendered."²⁹⁾

27) Kathleen Blake, pp.56-58 my italics.

28) Ellin Ringler, pp.56-58.

29) Jeanie G. Thomas, pp.393-394.

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