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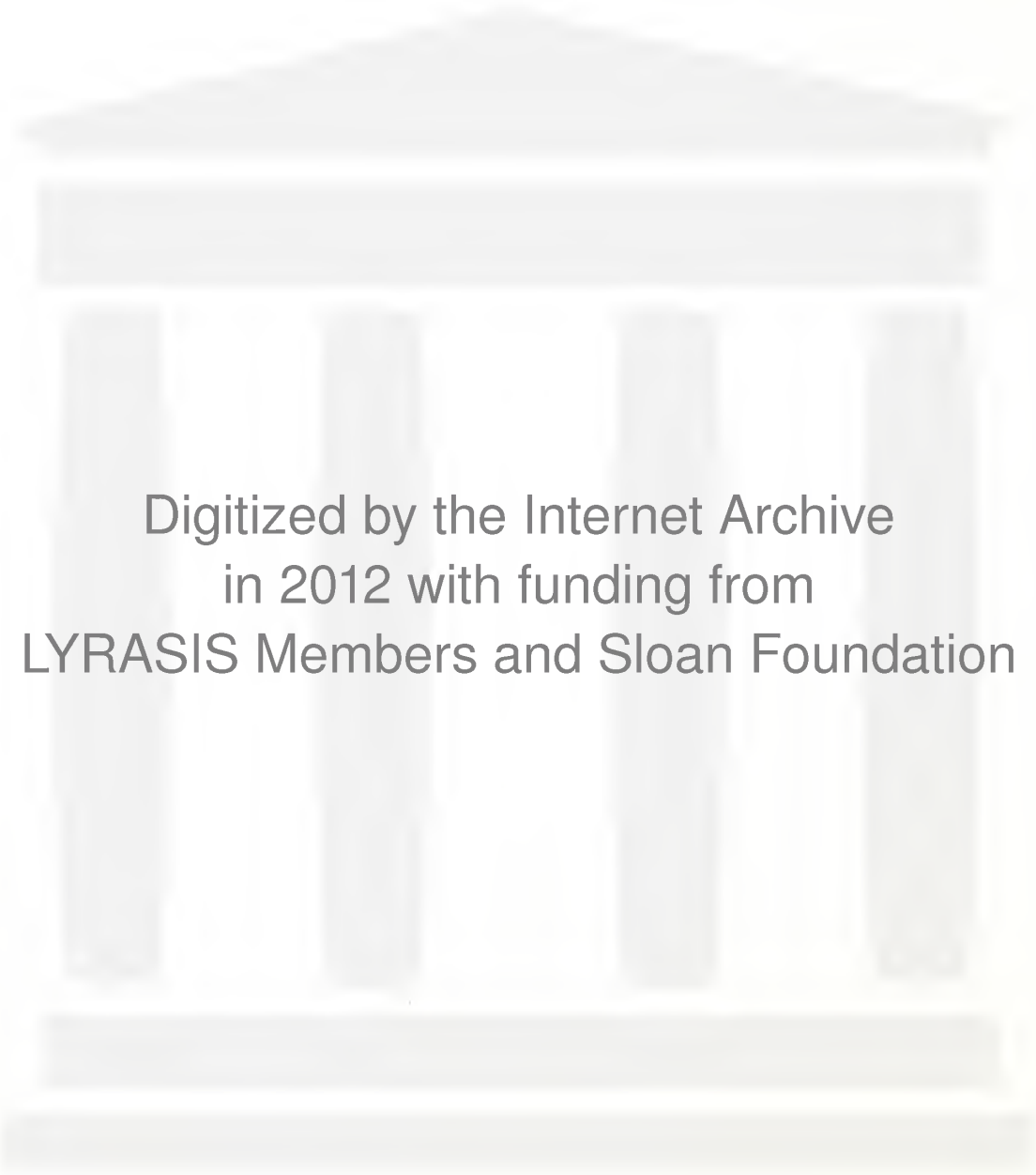

Formulating Fantasies: Marriage in Victorian England and George Eliot's Middlemarch

by

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One of the oldest states of existence known to humanity, marriage is a traditional state of being, uniting one man and one woman to love, honor, cherish, and protect each other for the rest of their lives. In Victorian England, however, many men and women questioned traditional expectations concerning marriage. Society's norms in Britain dictated that marriage was the ultimate goal in the nineteenth century, and, according to Barbara Weiss, "there has perhaps never been an age (or a literature) as relentlessly *pro* marriage as the Victorian period" (67). However, many issues concerning marriage disturbed some freer-thinking Victorians, including novelist George Eliot. In her 1872 novel, Middlemarch, Eliot examines the lives of several characters in both courtship and marriage relationships. Through these characters, Eliot shows how many people are blinded by their own fantasies about an idealized marriage, and these fantasies render them sorely unprepared for the realities of the marriage union. Eliot gives the reader various perspectives on marriage through her characters, allowing us to see that although marriage was a contented state for many middle-class men and women, a large number of people were consumed by fantasies concerning marriage and later found the unrealistic expectations, inequities, and disillusionment in marriage to be intolerable.

Historical and Social Context

When Eliot began writing Middlemarch in 1871, the evolving Victorian attitudes about marriage were coming to maturity, as evidenced in the literature of the period, and the social attitudes of the era were the greatest influence on Eliot's subject matter and characterization in the novel. Although Eliot was concerned with these changing attitudes in the latter half of the nineteenth century, she set her novel in 1832, at the time of the First Reform Bill and five years before the coronation of Queen Victoria. By doing so, Eliot shows a contrast between the conceptions about marriage just prior to the Victorian age (in her novel's characters) and the attitudes about marriage forty years later (in the people reading her novel). Eliot demonstrates that the unrealistic expectations and attitudes concerning marriage existed prior to the reign of Queen Victoria, continued to be problematic after her coronation, and began a more realistic evolution only in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Throughout the Victorian period, propriety was a dominant aspect of society, publicly exemplified by the queen herself. To reinforce the standard of propriety, many writers produced a variety of conduct books to help Victorian women conform to these standards. However, these conduct books often placed unrealistic expectations on Victorian young women. For example, some books emphasized total self-annihilation for married women, placing a great emphasis on the joys of self-sacrifice in order to make a man happy (Calder 82). Does this mean that women

were not to seek happiness in marriage, but only self-sacrifice? According to many critics, the answer is yes. Jenni Calder stated that the Victorian woman "anticipated marriage as a release into happiness. It would give her existence a purpose, working for others, helping her husband" (12). These conduct books further indicated that it was a wife's duty to transform her home into a sacred shelter from the world, free from strife, worry, dissension, and sin. These instructions and recommendations placed high expectations on young women even before they entered marriage; after marriage, those young women were supposed to fulfill those expectations. Through the character of Dorothea Brooke, Eliot directly addresses many of these issues advocated through the conduct books and satirizes their effect on young women entering marriage.

The Victorian ideal of marriage itself placed the bulk of the moral responsibility on the wife, as indicated in the conduct books, minister's sermons, many popular poems, novels, and essays, and by the life of Queen Victoria herself. The wife was regarded as the moral guardian of the home, shielding her husband and children from the wicked world beyond her influence. One example of this belief is seen in the highly popular poem by Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in the House," composed between the years of 1854 and 1862. According to many twentieth century critics and feminists, this poem glorifies the self-sacrificing wife in a sentimental, patronizing manner and reduces the value of a woman as an individual. Virginia Woolf criticized this poem "both for the sentimentality of its

ideal of woman and for the oppressive effect of this ideal on women's lives" (Abrams, et al 1723). Although the speaker in the poem does praise his wife, "woman is naturally passive to [him]....[H]e alternates between praising woman's superiority to man and asserting her absolute dominion by him" (Christ 149, 152). Even though the Victorian woman was considered to be morally superior to man, he was superior to her in every other area of life. Her "angelic" superiority in no way increased her value or rights as an individual, and Eliot expounds upon this point in Middlemarch. In reaction to Patmore's poem, Maria Deraismes, a French journalist in the nineteenth century, stated, "Of all women's enemies, I tell you that the worst are those who insist that woman is an angel. To say that woman is an angel is to impose on her, in a sentimental and admiring fashion, all duties, and to reserve for oneself all rights" (qtd. in Freedman and Hellerstein 140). But in the nineteenth century, Patmore was praised for this poem by many Victorian men and women who agreed with this presentation of the ideal woman.

Although marriage was considered by many to be a woman's ideal state of being, legal rights in marriage were a privilege reserved only for the Victorian husband. Prior to the Victorian age, most people merely accepted these laws and traditions. However, some Victorians—including Eliot—questioned the long-held sole legal rights of men in marriage, and this questioning appeared in novels, in the courts, and in many other areas of Victorian life.

As stated previously, Victorian society, books, parents, and clergymen taught that marriage was a woman's providential purpose in life, but according to the law, marriage marked the end of a woman's individuality. In the first half of the nineteenth century, English common law dictated that "a woman forfeited power over herself and her property when she entered wedlock" (Holcombe 4). Therefore, all of her personal property, any money she might have had, and even the children she bore belonged solely to her husband. Not even in divorce or the husband's death was the wife guaranteed to receive the rights to any of her property or her children.

When a husband died, his will denoted how his estate and his children would be taken care of. If he so chose, he may have willed custody of his children to a brother or a friend instead of his wife, the children's mother. Many Victorian women found such laws to be repulsive and degrading. If a woman was truly the home's moral guardian and the "angel in the house," then why was she denied custody of her own children? In the 1830s, Caroline Norton, a popular London poet and novelist, was instrumental in creating the Infants and Child Custody Act of 1839 in response to this injustice. Norton, enraged that her husband had sent their three sons to an unknown destination and refused to let her see them, developed pamphlets asking Parliament to grant mothers custody of children under the age of seven and for the courts to decide the custody of older children (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 8-9). Norton said, "A woman may bear cheerfully the poverty which anomalies in the laws of property may entail upon her;...but against the inflicted

and unmerited loss of her children, she cannot bear up; she has not deserved that blow" (qtd. in Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 11). Submitting many of her pamphlets to Parliament under a male pseudonym, Norton eventually reached a sympathetic audience, and the bill was passed. Many Victorians, including Harriet Martineau, called the Infants and Child Custody Act of 1839 "the first blow struck at the oppression of English legislation in relation to women" (qtd. in Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 13). Although equal rights and responsibilities for both parents were not established in England until the Guardianship of Infants Act of 1925, Norton helped to lay the foundation for changes in the law regarding women's rights in marriage and in custody of their own children.

Just as a woman had no rights in the case of her husband's death, neither did she have any rights in divorce. Divorce was rare in nineteenth century England, and prior to 1857, a true, legal divorce could be granted only by a private act of Parliament (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 23). Because of the expense involved in such an undertaking, divorce was an option only for the upper-middle and upper classes of Victorian society. Even then, only the husband could initiate a divorce, and to legally obtain the divorce, he was required to prove that his wife had committed adultery, thereby violating their marriage. However, the wife was not allowed to appear or even to defend herself in the divorce court. If the husband were granted a divorce on the grounds of adultery (whether his wife was guilty or not), he retained legal possession of both his wife's property and their children

(Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 23). Not even the Infants and Child Custody Act of 1839 applied in the case of divorce. If a husband sought to divorce his wife and could somehow prove (or fabricate proof) that she had committed adultery, then the court dictated that she was obviously in no moral state to care for her children.

These divorce laws did not change until the passing of the Divorce Act of 1857. Under this law, "a woman who obtained either a judicial separation or a divorce was to have all the rights of an unmarried woman with respect to property" (Holcombe 12). This was the first time in English history that married women were granted control of their property in certain cases. However, this law applied only if the husband abandoned the wife, not vice versa. Still, the passage of this act was a considerable achievement in married women's legal rights, opening doors for further advancement in the future.

Inside marriage, women did not obtain legal rights to their own property until the Married Women's Property Act of 1870, which was passed at the time Eliot began writing Middlemarch. Under this law, married women were granted rights to their "separate property," which fell roughly into three categories: "the earnings and property they acquired by their own work after the passage of the Act; money invested in several specific ways...and with qualifications, property coming to them from the estates of persons deceased" (Holcombe 20). Although several wrinkles remained to be ironed out concerning this new law, it was a tremendous achievement for married women's property rights in the nineteenth century.

While married women suffered from lack of laws to protect them as individuals, unmarried women also suffered under the strains of Victorian society. In an age that idealized marriage and regarded it as a woman's purpose in life, the concern over spinsters worried many Victorians. Women were under great pressure to marry due to their "sexual and economic vulnerability, their desire for respectability and security, and their longing (in many cases) for children combined with the growing ideal of romantic love" (Freedman and Hellerstein 121). Because of these pressures, many women feared rejecting a marriage proposal because marriage was considered such a necessary component of their lives. However, in mid-nineteenth century England, there were nearly half a million more women than men, and approximately 12 to 15 percent of all British women never married (Freedman and Hellerstein 121). The question lurking in many minds was how these unmarried women fit in a society that in many ways revolved around marriage, and Eliot addresses the spinster issue in Middlemarch through Mary Garth, a likely candidate for spinsterhood.

Writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Frances Power Cobbe examines the concern over unmarried women thoroughly in her essay, "What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?" In this essay, Cobbe presents two possible solutions to the spinster problem:

> 1st, We must frankly accept this new state of things [spinsterhood], and educate women and modify trade in accordance therewith, so as to make the condition of celibacy as little injurious as possible; or—
>
> 2nd, We must set ourselves vigorously to stop the current which is leading men and women away from the natural order of Providence. We must do nothing whatever to render celibacy easy or attractive; and we must make the utmost efforts to promote marriage by emigration of women to the colonies, and all other means in our power. (237)

Cobbe heavily criticizes this second option, although Britain was deporting large numbers of single women as brides to the colonies. Because marriage was presented as the only purpose for a woman's life, Cobbe felt that the lack of choices caused marriage to become "a matter of cold, philosophic choice" (238). Cobbe does not believe that every young woman should be married by the age of twenty, as middle-class society dictated. Instead, Cobbe presents the reader with more options for a woman's life, such as education and employment, as she discusses the first possible solution to the spinster problem. Cobbe backs up her argument in favor of this solution by stating, "Only a woman who has something else than making love to do and to think of will love really and deeply" (241). Cobbe not only advocates that unmarried women be given choices beyond marriage, but she also believes that if they did embark on other paths and chose to marry later in life, then their marriages

would only be richer and greater because they were able to explore life as individuals before entering marriage.

Like Cobbe, Dr. George Drysdale, a physician practicing in Edinburgh in the latter half of the nineteenth century, also examined the spinster question. Possessing radical views at the time, Drysdale believed that monogamous wedlock was destructive to the human psyche, stating, "The fear of remaining an old maid, or the wish to obtain the social advantages and protection of marriage, is the real motive which influences the woman [to marry]. Such marriages are in reality cases of legalised prostitution" (Helsinger, Sheets, and Veeder 70). Drysdale added that the expectations for all women to be married and the fear of spinsterhood caused many bitter, unhappy, and unnecessary marriages in nineteenth-century Britain. Like Cobbe, Drysdale favors the option for a woman to have the ability to seek out her own path in life before committing herself in marriage.

In the 1890s, many Victorian writers became more vocal concerning the changing attitudes about marriage. Although the marriage relationship was questioned in the beginning of the Victorian period by many individuals, such as Caroline Norton and Harriet Martineau, these questions turned into forceful arguments by the last decade of the nineteenth century. In fact, the essays of Marie Corelli and Mona Alison Caird, written in the waning years of the Victorian era, indicate that the marriage issue was never fully resolved. For example, Corelli advocated marriage as a woman's providential purpose in life, but she argued that

Victorian middle-class marriages had been reduced to business and bargaining. In her 1898 essay, "The Modern Marriage Market," Corelli stated, "Mothers teach their daughters to marry for a 'suitable establishment': fathers, rendered desperate as to what they are to do with their sons in the increasing struggle for life...say, 'Look out for a woman with money'" (30). Corelli followed the traditional strain of society's concept of marriage, but she felt that the affection and sanctity of marriage had been corrupted. Although Corelli argued for the romantic ideal of marriage, she saw that such an ideal was impossible to attain when the marriage "contract" was just that and nothing more. Correlli's beliefs and the demise of the romantic ideal in marriage are also apparent in many Victorian novels, notably in those of Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot.

Unlike Corelli, who believed that marriage was an acceptable goal for a woman, Victorian writer Mona Alison Caird felt that marriage was a horrible state of existence for most women because they lost their individuality. Also writing in the 1890s, Caird argued, "Dependence, in short, is the curse of our marriages, of our homes, and of our children, who are born of women who are not free" (632). Caird felt that the "holy estate" of marriage was a mockery because of its "atrocious injustices" (635). These injustices, according to Caird, rendered a woman completely helpless in society because she had no power to think, act, or become anything other than a man's wife. It is obvious that a Victorian woman found her identity in marriage, but many emerging feminists, like Caird, rejected this dependent identity.

With this historical context in mind, George Eliot's Middlemarch provides an intimate look into several marriages in a rural British community. Eliot wisely examines the lives of people from different social classes and walks of life, allowing the reader to see both the common problems and common virtues that exist in the novel's marriages. Through the lives of the characters, Eliot discusses several issues concerning marriage, including the characters' expectations and fantasies concerning wedlock, the concept of the "angelic," self-sacrificing woman, legal rights in marriage, and communication (or lack of it) between spouses. The success or failure of a Middlemarch marriage depends not only on the way the characters view their spouses, but also on how the characters view themselves within marriage. Most of the marriages that Eliot presents fail rather than succeed, and this is ironic in a period when marriage was usually the resolution to every social ill in a novel (Weiss 67). However, Eliot's "portraits of the Lydgate and Casaubon marriages make clear how the absence of any real identity of interests between husband and wife contributes in a major way to the failures of those marriages" (Graver 56).

Although Victorian society dictated that marriage was the social epitome for a man and a woman, the moral, social, and legal bases of marriage were questioned by many Victorians, evidenced through such laws as the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the Divorce Act of 1857, and the Married Women's Property Act of 1870. Published serially in 1871 and 1872, Middlemarch reflects the subtly changing Victorian concept of marriage. Instead of ending her novel with marriage as a

resolution, Eliot begins her novel with several marriages and follows the characters through their own questions about the state of matrimony.

Dorothea Brooke and Edward Casaubon

As stated earlier, the life of a Victorian young woman centered on preparation for marriage, and the life of Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch is no different. Eliot clearly shows that Dorothea's concept of marriage is greatly influenced by her religious, Puritanical beliefs. Despite her wealth and her thirst for knowledge, Dorothea "retained very childlike ideas about marriage" (Eliot 11). In the first chapters of the novel, Eliot does not mention that Dorothea longs for romance or love in a marriage; Dorothea imagines only that a "really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father" (Eliot 11) and "one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path" (Eliot 31). These are Dorothea's goals and expectations for marriage, and when she meets Edward Casaubon, she becomes wrapped up in a fantasy about Casaubon being "the ideal sort of man for a husband, a kind of cross between a father and the poet, Milton, to whom she could be both pupil and student" (Ermarth 113). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar see this fantasy as a way in which "Dorothea will be trapped in sterile submission to male force" (504). Dorothea is a selfless person, evidenced through her great desire to help the poor and assist Casaubon

with his Key to all Mythologies, but her concept of voluntary self-sacrifice is illusory, ultimately causing her to resent her husband and become bitter in her marriage to Casaubon.

Dorothea's fantasy emerges in the opening pages of Eliot's novel. Even in the prelude, Eliot mentions a "Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed" (4). This Saint Theresa syndrome foreshadows the woman that Dorothea becomes in the novel and the lack of fulfillment that she encounters as the wife of Casaubon. Although Dorothea's compulsive desires of self-sacrifice stem from noble intentions, she becomes obsessed with the attitude of selflessness. Through Dorothea's character, Eliot demonstrates how extreme self-sacrifice can be just as destructive as extreme selfishness. However, Dorothea remains true to her mission of self-sacrifice until she is later forced to question her motives as her marriage to Casaubon progresses and she begins to fall in love with Will Ladislaw.

The fantasies that consume Dorothea's mind stem largely from the emotional and physical conditions of her upbringing. Eliot states that Dorothea's ancestors, "though not exactly aristocratic, were unquestionably 'good'" (7), but her parents died when she was about twelve years old (8). This lack of parentage in her adolescence caused Dorothea to turn to Christianity for guidance, and as she grew older, "her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty

conception of the world" (Eliot 8). Dorothea turns this lofty conception into a fantasy about her future marriage, glorifying John Milton and "other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure" (Eliot 11). Dorothea's speculations continue to broaden, and she imagines that "the really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you Hebrew, if you wished it" (Eliot 11). Because Dorothea's father died when she was a child, she channels this absence in her life toward the fulfillment she expects to find in a husband. In fact, after she meets Casaubon and dwells on the possibility of marrying him, "there had risen before her the girl's vision of a possible future for herself to which she looked forward with trembling hope" (Eliot 29). However, Gilbert and Gubar see Dorothea's vision as a type of virgin sacrifice to a marriage of death (504). Although many people in the Middlemarch community agree that a marriage between Dorothea and Casaubon would be a mistake, no one, not even Dorothea's sister Celia, can persuade her not to marry Casaubon. Because of the fantasies she created, she desires to be his wife, certain that she will find her "long-recognizable deed" by assisting him in his scholarly endeavors. Only after taking her marriage covenant does she realize the seriousness of her mistake and the futility of her fantasy.

Just as Dorothea's concepts and fantasies about marriage influenced her ideas about happiness and contentment in the union, Casaubon also carried his own expectations and fantasies into their marriage. As an older, religious bachelor who

had lived most of his life alone, Casaubon is quite ignorant about young women and about marriage itself. Because he has been isolated working on his Key to all Mythologies, "he felt the disadvantage of loneliness, the need for that cheerful companionship with which the presence of youth can lighten or vary the serious toils of maturity" (Eliot 28). Casaubon's fantasy develops only after he meets Dorothea and begins to court her. His lack of knowledge and understanding about women causes him to create an illusory world that marriage will supposedly bring to his life. He fantasizes about Dorothea as well, but not concerning her sexuality or ardour; instead, he focuses on her willingness to help him with his Key to all Mythologies and her submission to his superiority. For example, during their courtship, "he observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable previsions of marriage" (Eliot 69). Impressed by the character traits he saw in Dorothea, Casaubon eagerly proposes to her, and "when Dorothea accepted him with effusion, that was only natural; and Mr. Casaubon believed that his happiness was going to begin" (Eliot 311). Therefore, when Casaubon's fantasies about his marriage and Dorothea's wifely nature do not reach his expectations, he too becomes withdrawn, resentful, and bitter about his marriage to Dorothea.

Because Dorothea and Casaubon both bring their individual fantasies and expectations into their marriage union, their relationship suffers when these expectations are not fulfilled to make a successful marriage union. In their courtship,

the prospective marriage appears idyllic, but on their honeymoon to Rome, disillusionment about the marriage sets in when the couple has the first of many clashes of will. Both Dorothea and Casaubon desire "the idealized vision of the other" (Introduction 11) that was created in their own minds, but it quickly appears that this vision is impossible. The characters are wrapped up and essentially isolated in their own perceptions about what marriage should be, and neither effectively communicates his or her expectations, disillusionment, or resentment about the marriage to one another. For example, in Rome, Casaubon frequently leaves Dorothea alone so that he can pursue research on his Key to all Mythologies, that alone being strange behavior for a man on his honeymoon. Sad and lonely, Dorothea cries, knowing "her view of Mr. Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream" (Eliot 217). Here Dorothea's process of disillusionment begins, and it only escalates as her marriage progresses. She had expected to discover "large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind," but instead she found "anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither" (Eliot 218). Eliot even compares matrimony to an enclosed basin instead of the common metaphor of a sea, emphasizing Dorothea's and Casaubon's feelings of confusion and confinement in the early days of marriage.

Casaubon's disillusionment also begins on the honeymoon, and, like Dorothea, he does not share his feelings of disappointment. Eliot explains that Casaubon "had not found marriage a rapturous state" (222); instead, he viewed the union to be "more of a subjection that he had been able to imagine, since this charming young bride not only obliged him to much consideration on her behalf...but turned out to be capable of agitating him cruelly just where he most needed soothing" (225). Despite his disappointment and confusion, Casaubon cannot bring himself to discuss his feelings with Dorothea. Bege K. Bowers states that "never in the course of the marriage is he able to let down his carefully constructed persona, 'his manners,' and meet Dorothea's or his own deepest feelings head-on" (110). While still in Rome, Dorothea begins to sense this attitude in her husband, although Casaubon himself never communicated such feelings to her in words. After she senses this, Dorothea becomes acutely aware of the two separate, distinct selves that comprise a marriage union; she sees that Casaubon, like herself, "had an equivalent centre of self" (Eliot 235), and she realizes that those two selves with their own separate fantasies might never succeed in making marriage the contented state that they had expected.

Instead of realizing that their lack of communication harmed their marriage, Dorothea and Casaubon return to Middlemarch more withdrawn about their relationship. In fact, both begin to develop new fantasies about the other. For example, at the conclusion of the honeymoon, Dorothea realizes "there might be a

sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own"; therefore, she unflinchingly decides to "devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom" (Eliot 235). She believes that this decision on her part may help to destroy the wall that is slowly building between them. However, Casaubon "finds in Dorothea's 'self-sacrificing affection' not the completion of his existence but further cause for alienation" (Graver 60). Casaubon rejects Dorothea's devotion because he assumes that her actions stem from feelings of pity for him. He cannot tolerate such a possibility, and he pushes Dorothea's companionship even farther away from him. Instead, Casaubon realizes that "marriage, like religion and erudition, nay, like authorship itself, was fated to become an outward requirement" (Eliot 313). Both focus on that outward requirement to "keep up appearances," even though both Dorothea and Casaubon inwardly resent one another nearly to the point of hatred.

Despite her growing resentment of Casaubon, Dorothea cannot ignore the presence of Will Ladislaw in her life. He is the one person in the novel who forces Dorothea to reexamine her motives for self-sacrifice. From the time she first meets Ladislaw in Rome, Dorothea realizes that "she had never before seen any one who seemed so quick and pliable, so likely to understand everything" (Eliot 233). Developing a friendship with Ladislaw that she lacks with her husband, Dorothea soon discovers her attraction to him, a man who possesses a personality and characteristics completely opposite of her former ideals in a man. He has no money,

no high intellect, no lofty ideals, and no religious zeal. However, "Will is Eliot's radically anti-patriarchal attempt to create an image of masculinity attractive to women" (Gilbert and Gubar 528). Only through Ladislaw does Dorothea eventually see the futility of her self-sacrificing motives and, after Casaubon's death, the possibility of a happy and content marriage relationship.

Rosamond Vincy and Teritus Lydgate

Rosamond and Lydgate are also trapped within their own fantasies about the marriage relationship, but they appear to be even more deluded than Dorothea and Casaubon. While on her honeymoon, Dorothea realizes that she has been trapped in an illusory concept of marriage and recognizes that she must think differently about her marriage, but Rosamond clings to her fantasies and refuses to accept her disillusionment. Gilbert and Gubar note that "Dorothea and Rosamond can only express their dissatisfaction with provincial life by choosing suitors who seem to be possible means of escaping confinement and ennui," but for both women "marriage is soon associated with feelings of disappointment" (515). Like Dorothea, Rosamond had lofty ideals about a future marriage, but Rosamond's goals focused solely on how the union would help to raise her social status and fulfill her romantic dreams that she acquired while attending a finishing school for girls.

The education that Rosamond received at this finishing school plays a significant role in both the woman Rosamond becomes and the problems within her

marriage to Lydgate. In this environment, Rosamond learned the art of coquetry and catching a proper husband (a "prince charming"). This education renders her quite unprepared for the responsibilities in a marriage relationship. Through her characterization of Rosamond, Eliot indicates that such education for girls caused many of the problems in Victorian marriages because young women like Rosamond entered marriage expecting a fairy-tale type relationship. However, even after Rosamond weds Lydgate, she is still consumed by "the possibility of indefinite conquests" (Eliot 480). Although she holds marriage on a pedestal, Rosamond never wants to be the submissive wife; she wants to control the men in her life. She sees herself "making captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by [her] side—himself in fact a subject—while the captives look up forever hopeless" (Eliot 485). As Rosamond entertains these fantasies of romance, she quickly becomes infatuated with Ladislaw, a frequent guest in the Lydgate home. Eliot clearly shows this side of Rosamond's character to emphasize the negative effects of her education, but, unfortunately, young men like Lydgate were completely ignorant of such conceptions.

Rosamond begins weaving fantasies about a marriage to Lydgate when he arrives in Middlemarch. She does not wish to marry a Middlemarch man because "she was tired of the faces and figures she had always been used to" (Eliot 106), and "she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer" (Eliot 111). Therefore, a well-to-do stranger in the community was

necessary to fit into Rosamond's romance. When she meets Lydgate, "Rosamond could not doubt that this was the great epoch of her life. She judged of her own symptoms as those of awakening love, and she held it still more natural that Mr. Lydgate should have fallen in love at the first sight of her" (Eliot 130). She feels that Lydgate correctly corresponds to her ideal husband because he is foreign to Middlemarch, carries an air of distinction congruous with good family, and possesses "connexions which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank" (Eliot 130). However, unlike Dorothea's fantasies, which were largely a product of her religious beliefs and her lack of a father, Rosamond's fantasies stem from her education at the finishing school. These nineteenth-century schools taught young women that the only way to improve themselves was to marry above their social station in life, and Rosamond intends to do so. She has enjoyed a pampered life in her parents' home, but she desires that distinction given to families of "good birth." When her fantasy simply does not come true in a marriage to Lydgate, who was essentially ostracized from his "good" family when he became a doctor, Rosamond reacts to the situation by struggling to repress her resentment of him while searching for new fantasies of fulfillment.

Lydgate also has his own fantasies about marriage, even prior to meeting Rosamond. According to Eliot, Lydgate dreamed of a marriage in which "his wife would have that feminine radiance...that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys" (183). When he meets

Rosamond, he said of her, "She is grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music" (Eliot 103). Lydgate's perception of what "a woman ought to be" renders him sorely unprepared for his marriage to Rosamond. During their courtship, Eliot's narrator exclaims, "Poor Lydgate! Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world in which the other knew nothing" (185).

Unlike Casaubon, however, who entered marriage completely blind and ignorant concerning a woman's needs and perceptions, Lydgate has some prior experience with a woman's feelings about marriage through his infatuation with Madame Laure. Lydgate's experience with this actress, "the first to whom he had given his young adoration" (Eliot 171), causes him to realize that some women do not feel comfortable in the marriage relationship, or, as Laure said, "I do not like husbands" (Eliot 171). After Lydgate becomes aware of Laure's shocking revelation that she purposefully killed her husband, he resolves to "take a strictly scientific view of woman, entertaining no expectations but such as were justified beforehand" (Eliot 171). Therefore, when Lydgate meets Rosamond, impressed by her charms, talents, and beauty, he convinces himself that his expectations concerning her are completely justified, resulting in his own fantasy about Rosamond being everything "a woman ought to be." Although at first Lydgate states to various Middlemarch citizens that he has no plans to marry, he soon disregards that statement when he is "completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this

sweet young creature depended on him for her joy" (Eliot 336). Karen Chase observes that Lydgate's sudden proposal of marriage to Rosamond bears the precedent of his earlier passion for Laure (140). With both women, Lydgate is caught up in his own fantasy about romance as "an idea had thrilled through the recesses within him which had a miraculous effect in raising the power of passionate love" (Eliot 335). Lydgate falls in love because of his own fantasy about what the relationship "ought to be." Engulfed by his idealized passion for Rosamond when he proposes marriage, Lydgate forgets the earlier experience with Laure and his vow to take "a strictly scientific view of woman." However, after Lydgate and Rosamond are wed, he remembers Laure's words and realizes that he has only deceived himself by ignoring the warning.

Both Lydgate and Rosamond enter marriage like Dorothea and Casaubon, believing that their individual fantasies of perfection and romance will be realized. However, "no sooner do Lydgate and Rosamond appear as husband and wife than they begin to exhibit those disabilities endemic to the roles they unthinkably play" (Graver 57). From the inception of their marriage, Eliot indicates that it is destined to fail, and both spouses contribute equally to the marriage's demise.

When Rosamond realizes that she will not gain the social prestige and romantic haven that she desires in her marriage to Lydgate, she decides to use her own methods and determination to seek those avenues for herself. Even though she knows that they are rapidly becoming swallowed in debts they cannot pay back,

Rosamond persists in believing that she can always have her way in everything, for "what she liked to do was to her the right thing" (Eliot 648). When Lydgate tries to explain their financial difficulties, Rosamond becomes bitter against him, feeling that he has betrayed her and presented himself falsely to her before their marriage. Indeed, Eliot states that "if she had known how Lydgate would have behaved, she would never have married him" (661). Lydgate attempts to lead his household and his wife's expensive tastes back to a more affordable level, but "when he gives orders, Rosamond calmly countermands them, going behind his back time and again with a serene confidence that she understands things better, and that things should be ordered as she likes" (Ermarth 118). Rosamond's illusory concept concerning their financial state and her own perceptions about "the right thing" cause new upheavals in their marriage; subsequently, both Lydgate and Rosamond passionately regret their decision to marry.

At the point of financial difficulty, Lydgate also realizes that his marriage to Rosamond will not meet his expectations and desires. Shortly into their marriage, Lydgate sees "how far he had traveled from his own dreamland, in which Rosamond Vincy appeared to be that perfect piece of womanhood" (Eliot 646). What Lydgate had envisioned to be a perfect marriage with a beautiful, talented young woman soon turns into a frustrating nightmare for him. He even begins to compare Rosamond to Laure, "who had that same calm way of violating his most basic assumptions about what would or could be reasonable" (Ermarth 118). Lydgate

begins to assume that all women inwardly feel like Laure: "'Would *she* [Rosamond] kill me because I wearied her?' and then, 'It is the way with all women'" (Eliot 656). Lydgate sees Rosamond and the marriage itself as a burden, and, unlike Rosamond who continually crafts new dreams and fantasies to escape their disappointing reality, Lydgate becomes mired in disillusionment and misery. He does not learn from his mistakes and his failed marriage; instead, he stereotypes all women and withdraws into a life full of bitterness.

Mary Garth and Fred Vincy

Unlike the Casaubon and Lydgate marriages, which were largely a product of fantasy and crippled by disillusionment, the relationship between Mary Garth and Fred Vincy depends upon open communication, honesty, and rationality. However, the success of this relationship is not a result of Fred's initiative, but Mary's. Gilbert and Gubar state that "by shaping Fred's life and values, in fact, she demonstrates the elevating effect of a woman's influence" (513). Neither Dorothea nor Rosamond has an uplifting, positive effect on her husband like Mary does for Fred. Mary is different from these two other female characters because she refuses to lose herself in wishful thinking; both her upbringing and her station in life cause her to rely solely on common sense and honesty to achieve her goals.

Although Eliot devotes only a minor portion of Middlemarch to show the relationship between Mary and Fred, these two characters represent optimism about

marriage in a novel that critically examines the flaws and misconceptions within the marriage union. While Dorothea is shaped by her religious zeal and Rosamond is characterized as the product of a finishing school, Mary's main influence in the novel is her parents, an influence that is lacking in Dorothea's life and undeveloped in Rosamond's. This parental guidance molds Mary's views on the world, especially concerning a potential marriage with Fred. Her relationship with her father, Caleb Garth, is particularly important in her development in the novel. Mr. Garth frequently offers advice to his daughter, especially concerning marriage, once stating, "A woman, let her be as good as she may, has got to put up with the life her husband makes for her" (Eliot 287). Mary shares many of the same qualities that her father possesses, "but she is a less simplified and therefore more interesting character because of her acuteness of perception and trenchancy of judgment—she gauges everybody" (McSweeney 78). Although Mary could develop elaborate fantasies as a means of "escape" in her present station in life, she does not allow herself to become mired in such fantasies; as a result, Mary's life is free of the heartache and turmoil evident in the lives of Dorothea and Rosamond.

Concerning Mary's physical attributes, Eliot describes her in contrast to the physical beauty of Dorothea and Rosamond, further differentiating her from them. Mary is plain, brown, and short in stature, but "honesty, truth-telling fairness, was Mary's reigning virtue: she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them" (Eliot 124). Coming from a lower-middle class family and possessing little physical

beauty, Mary could easily have created an illusory world for herself on a much larger scale than either Dorothea or Rosamond did. However, Mary realizes the importance of "truth-telling fairness," and she refuses to become blinded by a romance with Fred, even though his middle-class rank would improve her status. Unlike Dorothea and Rosamond, who initially see their happiness in their future husbands, Mary does not entertain such fantasies. In fact, to all intents and purposes, it is she who makes Fred (Blake 301). Mary not only serves as a foil for Dorothea and Rosamond, but she also represents the one woman in the novel who has some positive control over her relationship with the opposite sex.

From the time Eliot introduces Mary and Fred, they clearly have a courting relationship. Mary explains "that she loves Fred, 'Because I have always loved him,' and throughout *Middlemarch* runs the suggestion that present action follows the course of past desires" (Chase 140). Mary's present action indicates that, although she loves Fred, she is not in a hurry to marry him. She sees Fred's irresponsible nature, and, although unintentional, his gambling results in constant debts. Mary knows that she can never marry a man with such a nature, and will not "put up with" his lack of focus and responsibility. She knows, and confesses in confidence to Farebrother, that she "will never be [Fred's] wife if he becomes a clergyman....His being a clergyman would be only for gentility's sake, and there is nothing more contemptible than such imbecile gentility" (Eliot 573-574). Mary loves Fred enough to insist that he form his character not around what his family or society deems him

to be, but around what is truly appropriate for him as an individual. Without this unflinching guidance from Mary, Fred would have entered the clergy, most likely resulting in a life of discontentment.

While both Dorothea and Rosamond initially placed marriage on a pedestal and set the union as an idealized goal in their lives, Mary does not view marriage in this manner. She has the opportunity on several occasions throughout the novel to marry either Fred or Farebrother; however, she does not pursue those possibilities. Obviously, Mary loves Fred and cares for Farebrother, but following her father's advice, she is not anxious to "put up with" the life either man offers her. As a result, Mary appears to be a likely candidate for spinsterhood. Not only does she possess the plain, homely appearance of a stereotypical spinster, but she is also forced to seek employment outside her parents' home. After Peter Featherstone dies, leaving Mary without a source of income, she prepares to teach in a school at York. Concerning this situation, she tells her parents, "You see, I must teach: there is nothing else to be done," even though she adds, "I am not fond of a schoolroom: I like the outside world better" (Eliot 444). Even though Mary confesses that she would not enjoy teaching, she is prepared to do so rather than accept a marriage proposal from Fred and become the wife of a man who lacks self-motivation and integrity.

Mary expects Fred to develop the "honesty and truth-telling fairness" with which she views the world, but Fred's main goal is simply to wed Mary. He knows

that compared to her, he is a foolish, irresponsible, egotistical person; however, he also believes that "only the love of a good woman can save him" (McSweeney 84). Therefore, Fred's perceptions of marriage are much different from those of Casaubon and Lydgate. Fred is not ignorant about Mary's mind or her expectations about marriage. They have known each other since childhood, and Fred also proposed to Mary as a child, giving her an umbrella ring to "seal" the engagement. Since that time, Fred has been aware of his attraction to Mary, and their relationship has matured over several years. This maturity, and the maturity that Fred gains with the help of Mary and Mr. Garth, lays a strong foundation for the marriage relationship that Fred and Mary prepare for.

When Fred becomes aware of Mary's willingness to wait for him to establish a suitable occupation, he gains a courage and determination that he lacked previously in the novel. Serving as Mr. Garth's apprentice, Fred knows that it will take a few years for him to prepare financially for marriage. However, Mary is not discouraged; she states, "I have been single and merry for four-and-twenty years and more: I suppose it will not be quite as long again as that" (Eliot 913). Of the three unions described in this paper, Fred and Mary's is the only one that survives in the finale, achieving "a solid mutual happiness" (Eliot 918). Both characters demonstrate devotion and patience, characteristics necessary for a successful marriage relationship.

Conclusion

When Eliot created the marriages between Dorothea and Casaubon, Rosamond and Lydgate, and Mary and Fred, she forced her readers to examine Victorian society's concepts about the traditional marriage union. By setting her novel in 1832, however, Eliot satirizes society at that time, while simultaneously highlighting the fact that many of those problems in the 1830s still existed in the 1870s. For example, the conduct books and finishing school ideology that influenced Dorothea and Rosamond were immensely popular, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century. Even though the influence of these books and this education began to dwindle in the late nineteenth century, the women who were trapped in this mindset still suffered the consequences of false perceptions and expectations concerning marriage. These traditional notions of an ideal marriage union emphasized social status, financial security, and voluntary self-sacrifice by the wife. However, as the Victorian era progressed, many people, including Eliot, critically examined these traditions and proposed a concept of marriage that emphasized love, honesty, and mutual understanding as the keys to a successful relationship. In Middlemarch, Fred and Mary represent Eliot's optimism about marriage in a novel filled with problematic relationships. The Lydgate and Casaubon marriages fail largely because these unions are grounded in illusions, but Fred and Mary focus on one another and acquire the mutual understanding necessary for a successful marriage.

Although the majority of Eliot's novel focuses on courtship and early marriage, she also shows the mature marriage relationship between Nicholas and Harriet Bulstrode, which merits some discussion. This marriage, like the three others in the novel, represents "the union of a worthy spouse with a more-or-less unworthy one" (Green 89), but the difference lies in how the Bulstrodes cope with the threat to their marriage. When the scandals about Bulstrode's past and the death of John Raffles become public, Harriet never contemplates leaving her husband, although many of her friends think a separation would be appropriate (Eliot 824). Harriet undergoes a shock when she discovers the scandals, and "the twenty years in which she had believed in him and venerated him by virtue of his concealments came back with particulars that made them seem as odious deceit" (Eliot 831). Even though Harriet feels betrayed by Bulstrode, she "had a loyal spirit within her. The man whose prosperity she had shared through nearly half a life, and who had unvaryingly cherished her—now that punishment had befallen him it was not possible to her in any sense to forsake him" (Eliot 831). Eliot endorses Harriet's virtues of loyalty and honesty, but her "loyalty to her dishonored husband most vividly and dramatically acts out devotion to duty, and she most greatly suffers from it" (Green 90). Harriet does suffer, relinquishing "all the gladness and pride of her life" (Eliot 832) to support her disgraced husband. Because of her decision, Harriet is a woman of strength and courage, and these qualities are also evident in Mary Garth. Just as Mary shapes Fred's development before their marriage, Harriet

molds her marriage with Bulstrode by remaining loyal to him throughout the course of their relationship.

As a critic of marriage throughout her life, Eliot's representation of marriage in Middlemarch demonstrates how the Victorian concept of marriage had evolved by 1872. The positive aspects of this progress emerge in Mary and Harriet, women unfettered by fantasies of an unrealistic union. While Mary and Harriet reject the traditional nineteenth-century goals of marriage that Dorothea and Rosamond uphold, both women remain honest with themselves and their spouses. Eliot, as an eminent Victorian woman and an early feminist, was acutely aware of the necessity for open communication and equality between the sexes in a marriage relationship. In Middlemarch, Eliot clearly shows the progressive strides made in these areas, but she also demonstrates the immense need for further development in the future.

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