



# *Journal of Arts & Humanities*

## Dorothea and the Written Word: Feminism and Heroism in *Middlemarch*

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### ABSTRACT

In her novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot challenges assumptions about gender and genre by associating Dorothea Brooke with both masculine authority and feminine emotion. Eliot does so by connecting Dorothea both to the act of writing and to the artistic production itself. Unlike Rosamond Vincy, who is associated with the romance and with popular poetry in order to devalue her, Dorothea is connected to a number of more elevated genres, which are also associated with male authority. By driving the plot, Dorothea assumes the role of the writer in several ways: she ensures Celia's marriage with Sir James by choosing Casaubon, she reunites Lydgate and Rosamond, and helps restore Lydgate's good name. The letter she writes to accept Casaubon's offer of marriage is written "three times, not because she wished to change the wording, but because her hand was unusually uncertain" (Eliot, 1968, p. 33). Her ardor gets in the way of her handwriting, but not of her "wording." Eliot endows Dorothea's writing with characteristics that are stereotypically feminine (motivated by love and intimacy) and stereotypically masculine (growing out of ardor, and expressing vigor, force and energy). By infusing the intimate with the powerful, and associating both with the act of writing, Eliot conflates the typical province of woman with the typical province of men thus disrupting conventions of both gender and genre.

**Keywords:** Feminism, gender, genre, George Eliot, *Middlemarch*.

Available Online: 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2015.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Considering that George Eliot herself certainly did not live the life of a Victorian woman—as she was both a mistress and an author—it hardly stands to reason that she would hold her most promising heroine to the standards of a Victorian heroine. At the end of the novel, Eliot’s narrator notes, “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.”<sup>2</sup> By calling attention to the conventional life Dorothea was perceived to have led, Eliot perhaps suggests to readers to look below the surface, beyond the conventions. In this essay, I will argue that Eliot, in fact, creates a feminist heroine in Dorothea Brooke, one who is able to find a place in the world through her writings, through her authorship, much like her creator herself.

## 2.0 Literature Review

Many critics have remarked about the lack of heroic qualities they see in Dorothea. Gordon S. Haight is perhaps the best representative of this school of criticism. In the first George Eliot Memorial lecture published in the *George Eliot Fellowship Review*, Haight argues that Mary Garth is a much more compelling heroine than Dorothea is. Haight suggests that Dorothea can be considered the heroine only if “we define it as the principal figure...If in our definition of ‘heroine’ we include the element of admirable,” he argues that Dorothea is not the woman who fits the definition (1973, p. 8). He describes Dorothea’s decision to marry Edward Casaubon as a sign of her “immaturity” and as a sign of “a grave deficiency of natural sexual instinct” (Haight, 1973, p. 9). He also uses the term “pathetic zeal” to describe her desire to help her husband write his *Key to All Mythologies* (Haight, 1973, p. 9). Her Swiss education, Haight argues, “proves a less adequate preparation for life” than Rosamond’s (1973, p. 10). “Like Rosamond,” Haight writes, Dorothea “is entirely lacking in humor. She is short sighted, liable to step on small dogs, but equally blind to overpowering facts” (1973, p. 10). Perhaps most relevant to the current discussion, Haight argues that “critics who like to see a heroic self-identification of [Eliot] as author in Dorothea would do well to look closer at plain, honest Mary Garth” (1973, p. 10).

Dorothea Brooke is a disappointing character not only to critics such as Gordon Haight, but also to modern feminists.<sup>3</sup> Carol Siegel argues, for example, that Dorothea is “reduced in complementarity [to Will] to a help-meet wife” (1998, p. 53). In her essay that explores Eliot’s references to the Shakespearean sonnet in *Middlemarch*, Siegel writes that “critics have long remarked that Eliot denies her characters the sort of power that she enjoyed both in her life as an author and with Lewes (let alone with Cross). Authorial power is especially important because it is in Eliot’s self-styling as an author that we look for evidence of her text’s feminism” (1998, p. 44). That is exactly the response to *Middlemarch* that this paper uses as a jumping off point, although, for Siegel, it is merely a tangential point.

In this essay, I do exactly what Haight and others describe as unlikely: reclaim Dorothea’s heroic status by looking for signs of Dorothea as “author.” By exploring the ways that Eliot associates characters with particular literary genres and the ways that Eliot represents the act of writing, I argue that readers can see the power that Eliot ascribes to Dorothea, power that she denies to most of the other characters in the novel. Because previous critics have not used this lens—the lens of authorship—to explore the novel’s central female character, they have not been able to appreciate Dorothea’s forceful and feminist character.

## 3.0 Methodology

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<sup>2</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968) 611. All quotations from the novel are from this edition; page numbers are given in the body of the essay.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent summary of feminists’ responses to *Middlemarch*, see Ellin Ringler, “*Middlemarch*: A Feminist Perspective,” *Studies in the Novel* 15 (1983): 55-61.

Using a feminist approach, I explore the textual evidence in the novel that suggests that Dorothea can be read in a much more progressive manner. Because Eliot so often compares Dorothea to an author, and compares her writings with the other writings of others, I suggest that scrutiny of these details will be a productive enterprise.

#### 4.0 Dorothea as Author

Eliot alerts readers to the importance of genre and its relationship with gender when she refers to *Middlemarch* as a “home epic” a term that combines the stereotypically feminine (that which is concerned with domesticity and love, and which is generically the novel) and the stereotypically masculine (that which is grand, majestic and written in an elevated style, and which is generically the epic) (Eliot, 1968, p. 608). . Kenny Marotta describes the “home epic” as “oxymoronic” and indicates that Eliot, in choosing this term, is “combining domesticity with grandeur” (1982, p. 403). By creating this new form, Eliot suggests that typical categories—both of gender and genre—will not suffice.

One significant way genre functions in *Middlemarch* is that it helps Eliot communicate character. For example, in the portrait of Rosamond Vincy, Eliot uses genre to discredit a character. Eliot introduces Rosamond by connecting her with several genres, only to rule out her association with the elevated ones. Rosamond, readers are told, “found time. . .to read the best novels, and even the second best, and she knew much poetry by heart. Her favorite poem was ‘Lalla Rookh’” (Eliot, 1968, p. 124). Eliot’s critique of Rosamond as a reader is abundantly clear in this passage. That Rosamond “found time” to read suggests the dilettantish attitude that she brings to most tasks, including literary ones (Eliot, 1968, p. 124). Eliot’s ironic treatment of Rosamond’s literary taste is also apparent when she indicates the extent to which Rosamond is selective: she read “the best novels, and even the second best” (Eliot, 1968, p. 124). Because Eliot wants *Middlemarch* itself to be considered one of the “best novels”—which indeed it was—Rosamond’s unadulterated femininity must be critiqued within the “home epic,” which artfully combines both the feminine and the masculine (Eliot, 1968, p. 124).

Rosamond’s all-too-dramatic turns of neck, her vanity, and her obvious solipsism also communicate her connection to another genre—the romance. In fact, Rosamond can be seen as a parody of a romance heroine. Eliot notes that, at Mrs. Lemon’s school, Rosamond learned a smattering of French literature that provides her with descriptions of “how delightful [it is] to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side” (Eliot, 1968, p. 319). Rosamond attempts to follow the pattern suggested by the French romances with which she is familiar. As Marotta writes of Lydgate and Rosamond, “we might call their unhappy marriage the punishment deserved by their egoism, which finds expression in dreams cast in the mold of a specifically literary romance” (Eliot, 1968, p. 405). When she despairs of Lydgate providing her with material objects as well as with love, in other words of becoming the romantic hero of a “literary romance,” she can turn instead to Will Ladislaw to flatter her and to feed her vanity (Marotta, 1982, p. 405).

Through her connection to *Middlemarch*’s own poet, Will Ladislaw, Rosamond is associated with another genre—the lyric. But rather than being defined through her connection to poetry, Rosamond is defined by her lack of connection to it. Rosamond memorizes rather than reads poetry; in fact, her knowledge of poetry is merely one of her ladies’ school accomplishments. Eliot emphasizes Rosamond’s dilettantish nature by identifying her favorite poem as ‘Lalla Rookh’ (an “immensely popular” poem by Thomas Moore<sup>4</sup>). Thus, Rosamond’s poetic taste suggests her lack of literary competency.

One other way that Eliot communicates the quality (or lack thereof) of Rosamond’s character is by associating her with music because of its obvious connection to poetry. Rosamond’s musical performances, like her person, are beautiful, yet Eliot uses Rosamond’s musical talents to critique her even further. Eliot points to the moral implications of Rosamond’s dilettantism by having Rosamond

<sup>4</sup> This information was provided by W.J. Harvey’s notes to the Penguin edition of the novel.

drive a wedge between Will Ladislaw and Dorothea through her music. When Will tells Rosamond that “it is always fatal to have music or poetry interrupted,” after Dorothea walks in on their performance, he is not referring to the “rendering of ‘Lungi dal cara bene’” (Eliot, 1968, p. 318). The music and poetry, metaphorically the love between Will and Dorothea, is what gets interrupted. Eliot also uses music to establish that Rosamond is a dilettante in yet another way. Eliot writes:

It is true she sang “Meet me by moonlight,” and “I’ve been roaming”; for mortals must share the fashions of their time, and none but the ancients can be always classical. But Rosamond could also sing “Black-eyed Susan” with effect, or Haydn’s canzonets, or “Voi, che sapete,” or “Batti, batti”—she only wanted to know what her audience liked. (Eliot, 1968, p. 119)

Rosamond’s motives are to please, whenever possible, and while that might be an admirable trait in certain circumstances, it is not in this one. Rosamond’s taste is completely dependent on “what her audience liked”; she has no standards of her own (Eliot, 1968, p. 119). Or, as Alan Shelston writes, Rosamond “is perfectly clear-minded about how to deploy her talents to the best advantage” (1993, p. 24). Eliot uses genre—the novel, the romance, and the lyric—as well as music to characterize Rosamond as inadequate. Rosamond must be disassociated from the good novel and poetry, the combination from which “home epic” is derived.

Eliot connects Dorothea with generic categories as well; but rather than revealing the inadequacy of Dorothea’s character through genre, Eliot establishes Dorothea’s ability to transcend genre. Eliot introduces Dorothea by noting that she has the “impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of today’s newspaper” (Eliot, 1968, p. 5). Eliot associates Dorothea with scripture, poetry and journalism, the first two of which are the supposed province of her first husband, Edward Casaubon, and the last, the province of her second husband, Will Ladislaw. Eliot associates Dorothea with various genres to create character, and, at the same time, to challenge the hierarchies of genre itself. For example, she associates Will with a low genre (journalism), although we ultimately admire Will and not Casaubon who is connected to the higher genres.

Dorothea is connected with these genres in her own right, as well as in terms of her two husbands. Or rather, Eliot connects Dorothea to genre by having her refuse to be defined by it. Eliot characterizes Dorothea, in part, by having her reject “the shallows of ladies’ school literature,” unlike Rosamond, whose character Eliot defines by connecting her to literature of this kind (Eliot, 1968, p. 18). Eliot also describes Dorothea’s character by opposing her actions and emotions to those depicted in the lyric and dramatic genres. For example, Eliot notes that Dorothea’s interest in Casaubon should not be mistaken for “the illusions of Chloe about Strephon” which have been “sufficiently consecrated in poetry” (Eliot, 1968, p. 20). It would be equally misguided to compare Dorothea’s feelings for Casaubon to “Miss Pippin adoring young Pumpkin” which is “a little drama” that “never tired our fathers and mothers” (Eliot, 1968, p. 20). In other words, Dorothea’s feelings for Casaubon cannot be understood in terms of the poetic or dramatic traditions; her emotions can be represented *in* genre (within the “home epic”) but not *by* genre.

When Eliot does associate Dorothea with genre, she disrupts conventions of gender, or, to borrow a phrase from Judith Butler, she creates “gender trouble.” For example, when Dorothea’s actions resemble those of a tragic character, she is described as both a hero and a heroine. Mrs. Cadwallader accuses Dorothea of “always playing tragedy queen” while Celia is “uneasy at [Dorothea’s] Hamlet-like raving” (Eliot, 1968, p. 391, 569). At another point in the novel, Eliot refers to Dorothea’s enthusiasm as “Quixotic,” and thus associates her with the hero rather than the heroine of what is often considered the first novel (Eliot, 1968, p. 308). Unlike Rosamond, who is to a great degree criticized for being overly feminine, Dorothea is exalted, in part because of her connections to both genders and to heroes as well as to heroines.

Eliot also associates Dorothea with the writer, as well as with writing, through Dorothea's connection to different genres. The association of Dorothea with the artist/writer can best be seen in her discussion with Will Ladislav about poetry. Will defines a poet as someone who has "a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it. . .so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion" (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). As such, Will reduces art to perception only. Dorothea responds by saying that Will "leave[s] out the poems" which are "wanted to complete the poet" (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). Dorothea says she understands what he means "about knowledge passing into feeling, for that seems to be just what [she experiences]" (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). But she is sure she could "never produce a poem" (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). Dorothea insists on the complexity of the relationship between poet and poem, and hence reveals an understanding of art that is more astute than Will's understanding is. When he responds to her analysis by saying "You are a poem," Will mistakes her complex analysis of art and artistic production for merely another simplification (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). He reduces her to the art object itself, or kills her into art. As Susan Gubar argues in "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," women have typically been associated with the object of art, rather than with the artist. Citing *Middlemarch* itself, Gubar writes "Dorothea Brooke...bemoans her inability to become a poet; how much of a comfort is Will Ladislav's assurance to her that 'You are a poem?'" (1985, p. 293). While Ladislav's comment is unlikely a comfort to Dorothea, Dorothea's response to Will is perhaps likely to provide comfort—to the reader—at least. Dorothea laughs at Will's "compliment" with a "birdlike modulation" (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). That is, she sings her reply as the poet sings her poem. Dorothea, despite her claim that she could not produce poetry, counters Will's reduction of her into the art form by playing the artist/poet in reply. Caleb Garth also helps us see Dorothea as a creative figure in a similar way when he describes Dorothea to his wife Susan. He tells Susan that she would "like to hear [Dorothea] speak. . .She speaks in such plain words, and a voice like music. Bless me! It reminds me of bits in the 'Messiah'" (Eliot, 1968, p. 402). Earlier in the novel, Eliot associates Dorothea with religious texts; she is like "a fine quotation from the Bible" (Eliot, 1968, p. 5). Here, rather than being associated with the text, Dorothea is associated with Handel, a creator of texts.

Indeed, as an orchestrator of the novel's events, Dorothea plays the role of the writer/creator throughout the novel. She insures Celia's marriage with Sir James by choosing Casaubon; she kills off Casaubon, in a way, through her reluctance to carry out his will; she reunites Lydgate and Rosamond; and she helps to restore Lydgate's good name by lending him a thousand pounds to pay Bulstrode. By portraying Dorothea as an important agent of the novel's action, and by associating most of the other characters with art forms rather than with the artistic endeavor, Eliot claims Dorothea for her own. Dorothea is the artist in *Middlemarch* the town, just as Eliot is the artist of *Middlemarch* the novel. By associating the heroine with herself, Eliot allows Dorothea to enjoy (symbolically) some of the same freedoms she herself has known as a woman. So if Dorothea fails as a woman, as critics including Haight have argued, she succeeds as an artist. Eliot must have felt that she "failed" as a woman by not being a wife, but she inverts this failure in the novel. Dorothea "fails" as a woman by being "absorbed in the life of another"—by being merely a "wife and mother" (Eliot, 1968, p. 611). The heroine's success cannot be located in any conventional place such as in the realm of marriage or even of vocation, but, rather, Dorothea's success is comprised of her ability to rise above the rules of gender and genre and to redefine the conception of the artist.

One way to understand Dorothea's role as a writer in the novel is to juxtapose her writing with other examples of authorship in the novel—with Rosamond and Lydgate's writing, as well as with her two husbands' written work. Rosamond and Lydgate provide an interesting contrast to Dorothea as a writer, because the former illustrate the rules of gendered writing that Dorothea disrupts. The Lydgate couple, like Casaubon and Dorothea, has one member who is a writer, and one who is not. Within each couple, the writer is the woman, not the man, as one might suspect. But unlike Dorothea, Rosamond is criticized when she chooses to write. There are two significant examples of Rosamond's bad judgment in choosing to write: first, she writes to Sir Godwin Lydgate to ask him for money and, second, she sends out invitations to an ill-fated evening party, which she has planned just after Lydgate is suspected

of having helped Bulstrode murder Raffles. Rosamond's writing is problematic because she uses writing both to meddle in male business and to disobey her husband.

When Sir Godwin responds to Rosamond's request for money, he points to the impropriety of her having written by addressing his letter to Lydgate, and not to Rosamond. Sir Godwin's first words are as follows: "Don't set your wife to write to me when you have anything to ask. It is a roundabout wheedling sort of thing which I should not have credited you with. I never choose to write to a woman on matters of business" (Eliot, 1968, p. 486). Sir Godwin erroneously assumes that Lydgate had asked Rosamond to write to him. Ironically, the opposite is the case; Rosamond's writing to Sir Godwin makes public her deliberate refusal of the subordinate role Lydgate demands of her.

Lydgate's response to Rosamond's planning an evening party is, again, a complaint about her having written. He makes the discovery that a party has been planned when "the last answer [comes] into [his] hands" (Eliot, 1968, p. 553). He says to Rosamond, "This is Chicheley's scratch. What is he writing to you about?" (Eliot, 1968, p. 553). Clearly, Lydgate is angry and embarrassed that Rosamond does not know the circumstances that make having a party impossible, and he is angry as well because the invitations have necessarily been refused. Importantly, the altercation between Rosamond and Lydgate takes place as a discussion over writing. "What is he writing to you about?" and "Why on earth have you been sending out invitations without telling me?" are the questions he asks (Eliot, 1968, p. 553). Rosamond is an embarrassment to Lydgate because she exercises the male prerogative of making decisions—and she does so by writing, the most masculine thing the overly feminine Rosamond can imagine. Her transgressions against Lydgate are also made public when she communicates in writing with others—and, hence, she makes her unwillingness to subordinate herself to her husband public also.

Rosamond's motives for writing are selfish. She writes to Sir Godwin because she wants more money so that she can present herself more successfully to Middlemarch society, and so that she and Lydgate will not be exposed for having spent money beyond their means. Likewise, she writes the letters of invitation to a party in order to create an illusion of success and happiness. As such, her writing marks her as a character that prefers illusions to reality. Rather than identifying Rosamond as a character who, through writing, is able to transcend gender and its relative constraints, Eliot uses Rosamond's writing to mark her as a character who is defined by and limited by these same constraints.

If writing is, to a certain extent, a male prerogative, Lydgate fails to exercise that prerogative, although in a different way than Casaubon does. Preferring oral communication instead, Lydgate is reluctant to use writing to communicate. When Lydgate himself considers asking Sir Godwin for money, he distrusts the mode of writing, and says "He could not depend on the effect of a letter" (Eliot, 1968, p. 485). Rather, he decides to take "a rapid journey to the North" to see Sir Godwin: "it was only in an interview, however disagreeable this might be to himself, that he could give a thorough explanation and could test the effectiveness of kinship" (Eliot, 1968, p. 485). Writing, according to Lydgate, is too permanent a form, from which one cannot retrench. Once Sir Godwin has refused him, Lydgate considers how he could ask Bulstrode for money. At one point, he decides to "write a letter," as he thinks about how he prefers the written word "to any circuitous talk," but, again, he mistrusts the written word and says "No; if I were talking to him, I could retreat before any signs of inclination" (Eliot, 1968, p. 497). Lydgate's desire to "retreat" and his unwillingness to put pen to paper mark him as a weak character—or at least a weaker character than the novel's heroine, Dorothea.

Lydgate chooses to write only once in the novel, when he wants to thank Dorothea for paying back Bulstrode's loan. Perhaps writing to a woman—albeit a woman who is his superior in terms of class status—is easier than writing to another man. This time, he combines the verbal and written modes. He shows Dorothea a letter and tells her he had intended to "carry it to Lowick in [his] ride" (Eliot, 1968, p. 579). Lydgate tells Dorothea that when "one is grateful for something too good for common thanks," writing is "less unsatisfactory than speech" since "one does not at least hear how inadequate the words are" (Eliot, 1968, p. 579, emphasis Eliot's). Even Lydgate's defense of writing is qualified; rather

than saying that writing is more satisfactory, he says that it is “less unsatisfactory than speech” (Eliot, 1968, p. 579). Like Caleb Garth who thinks words are the hardest part of business, Lydgate faults both written and verbal communication for their inability to convey meaning adequately. But perhaps Lydgate mourns not merely the inadequacy of language but his own inadequacy; he may be reluctant to “hear how inadequate” he has been (Eliot, 1968, p. 579). Lydgate, who demands submission from his wife, is embarrassed to accept a favor from a woman. He chooses to exercise the power of writing in a last-ditch effort to uphold the categories of gender, within which women are to be submissive and men productive and powerful. Writing is simply one indicator of that power dynamic.

Will Ladislav’s connection to writing is important, as Will serves as an important foil to Casaubon—the character most known for his inability to write. Eliot associates Will with writing in a number of important ways. After he decides to give up painting, Dorothea asks him “perhaps you will be a poet?” (Eliot, 1968, p. 166). Despite the fact that, to Mr. Brooke, Will “seems...a kind of Shelley,” Will doesn’t pursue poetry writing (Eliot, 1968, p. 263). Soon after this discussion with Dorothea, he writes to Casaubon and to Dorothea, ultimately to declare his desire to be a journalist.

The letters Will writes to Dorothea and to Casaubon provoke an argument that eventually lead to Casaubon’s first collapse, hence indicating their importance to the novel’s unfolding plot. Will’s first letters announce that he will be bringing Naumann’s painting, ironically entitled the “Dispute,” to Lowick personally (Eliot, 1968, p. 214). When Mr. Casaubon preemptively tells Dorothea that he doesn’t want “such distractions” such a visit would cause, she asks him why he “attribute[s] to [her] a wish for anything that would annoy” him (Eliot, 1968, p. 209). The couple exchanges harsh words, which are followed by an “apparent quiet...half an hour” after which Dorothea “heard the loud bang of a book on the floor, and turning quickly saw Mr. Casaubon on the library-steps clinging forward as if he were in some bodily distress” (Eliot, 1968, p. 209). Will and Will’s writing ultimately weaken Casaubon. The dispute over the proposed visit provokes Dorothea to harsh words and then silences Casaubon. Significantly, what Dorothea hears is the “bang of a book” (Eliot, 1968, p. 209). Will’s writing highlights Casaubon’s failure to write; literally, Will puts Casaubon’s book down. The description of Casaubon as “clinging” and in “bodily distress” calls attention to his weakness and serves to provide yet another contrast between Casaubon’s physical and mental frailty and Will’s vigor (Eliot, 1968, p. 209).

Will’s strength and Casaubon’s weakness are also revealed in the exchange of letters between Will and Casaubon about Will’s decision to take a job editing and writing for Mr. Brooke’s recently purchased political newspaper, the *Pioneer*. In Casaubon’s letter, he points out that Will’s acceptance of the job with the newspaper “touches [his] own position”; Casaubon is worried about the effects of Will’s status on his own (Eliot, 1968, p. 272). This concern reflects Casaubon’s feelings of inadequacy, since, as a member of the landed gentry and of the clergy, his social position is not at all in jeopardy. As Will later writes, in his reply to Casaubon’s letter, Casaubon’s position is “too substantial to be affected in that shadowy manner” (Eliot, 1968, p. 275). Casaubon also indicates that the proposal is “highly offensive” to him, and that he should “have some claim to the exercise of a veto here” (Eliot, 1968, p. 272). Yet he anticipates Will’s unwillingness to comply with his request by writing, at the letter’s end, that “the contrary issue must exclude you from further reception at my house” (Eliot, 1968, p.272). Will does not comply, and Casaubon’s claim that he has the power of veto is unheeded. In Will’s response to Casaubon’s letter, he also asks Casaubon’s pardon “for not seeing that those obligations should restrain [him] from using the ordinary freedom of living where [he chooses], and maintaining [himself] by any lawful occupation [he] may choose” (Eliot, 1968, p. 276). While asking Casaubon’s pardon may seem like an act of submission, what follows certainly is not. Will assures Casaubon that he will live and work as he chooses, despite Casaubon’s objections. These letters clearly identify the power dynamics at work in the relationship between Casaubon and his cousin. Will politely but firmly chooses to do as he wishes—here and elsewhere in the novel. The choice to represent this dispute in letters makes sense simply because Will is still in Rome and Casaubon has returned to Middlemarch. But that choice is significant in other ways as well. Will claims the right to be a writer in writing; Casaubon powerlessly objects to Will’s decision in writing. Will is a successful writer; Casaubon is not, here and elsewhere in the novel.

Indeed, Casaubon is the most obvious example of a failed writer in the novel. He is continually likened to the written word, but never to a writer. Sir James says that Dorothea will not fall in love with such a “dried book-worm”; Mrs. Cadwallader ironically remarks that “somebody put a drop [of his blood] under a magnifying-glass, and it was all semicolons and parentheses...Oh he dreams footnotes, and they run away with his brain” (Eliot, 1968, p. 17, 52). Dorothea remarks that he has shown her his “rows of note-books...But [she] has never heard [him] speak of the writing that is to be published” (Eliot, 1968, p.148-149). Casaubon’s life is the written word, but he himself is unable to produce a significant text. He is an impotent exerciser of the male prerogative.

By connecting Casaubon’s inability to write with his inability to procreate, Eliot genders the act of writing in yet another way. The narrator comments that Casaubon bestows his property upon Dorothea as an exchange for “family pleasures” and for the expectation that he would “leave behind him that copy of himself which seemed so urgently required of a man—to the sonneteers of the sixteenth century” (Eliot, 1968, p. 205) But Eliot notes that “Times had altered” since the sixteenth century, and that “no sonneteer had insisted on Mr. Casaubon’s leaving a copy of himself; moreover, he had not yet succeeded in issuing copies of his mythological key” (Eliot, 1968, p. 205). Though no sonneteer may have demanded these “copies,” the novelist has. Despite Eliot’s own expressions of sympathy for Casaubon, most of the characters she creates express very little compassion for him. Casaubon cannot write his key. He cannot produce offspring. He is impotent in these two different but connected ways. That Casaubon is a failed writer in the novel comprises his disgrace, and also points more emphatically to Dorothea’s success as a writer.

Chapter 29 provides a direct comparison between Dorothea’s writing and Casaubon’s, when Dorothea and Casaubon receive letters from Will, who is still in Rome. Casaubon is angry not only because Will has written to his wife, but also because he has written period. Casaubon is so furious that “his hand trembled so much that the words seemed to be written in an unknown character” (Eliot, 1968, p. 209). Will’s literary and sexual potency make Casaubon’s impotency all the more apparent. Eliot poignantly illustrates Casaubon’s failure at writing not only by comparing him to Will Ladislaw, but also by juxtaposing his inability with his wife’s ability to write: after angry words have been exchanged between Casaubon and Dorothea over Will’s letters, Dorothea is invigorated by the altercation over these letters. She “began to work at once, and her hand did not tremble; on the contrary...she felt that she was forming her letters beautifully” (Eliot, 1968, p. 209). Dorothea and Casaubon argue over writing (Will’s), and the argument is enacted not in spoken words, but in writing itself. Eliot confirms Dorothea’s superiority to Casaubon by pointing to the differences in their penmanship.<sup>5</sup> But even more importantly, Dorothea’s anger over this argument produces literary understanding; she not only writes more clearly than Casaubon, but she also “saw the construction of the Latin she was copying, and which she was beginning to understand, more clearly than usual” (Eliot, 1968, p. 209). Again, Casaubon’s frustrations about his inability to write, evoked by Will’s counter-example, are made even more apparent by the success of Dorothea’s own writing. Casaubon’s hand trembles, while hers does not; his penmanship becomes unreadable, while hers becomes more beautiful.

Moreover, Dorothea’s writing grows out of Casaubon’s failure to write. In defiance of her husband’s request, Dorothea chooses not to complete the Key to all Mythologies. Importantly, she articulates this choice in writing. Whereas Casaubon’s papers are empty of “all personal words” for Dorothea, she seals his Synoptical Tabulation in an envelope, on which she writes the following personal words: “I could not use it. Do you see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?” (Eliot, 1968, p. 362, 399). Dorothea writes in order to disrupt gender expectations. She writes to refuse a task that requires wifely subordination of her. Although Carol Siegel argues that marriage is depicted in the novel as a “place where virtuous wives must support

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<sup>5</sup> This incident is not the only one in the novel where penmanship is considered a telling characteristic: Fred Vincy, for example, is judged rather severely by Caleb Garth for his inadequacy in producing readable letters.



husbands' ambitions and worry about the bills," attention to the role Dorothea's writing plays in the novel suggests otherwise (1998, p. 41). As David L. Smith argues,

Dorothea not only exposes Casaubon as a fraudulent intellect, but also, by her frank "offensive capability of criticism," causes Casaubon to suffer a heart attack that eventually does him in. In short, by impeaching him, Eliot has the saintly Dorothea unintentionally kill the repository of the Key to all Myths. Can there be any doubt about Eliot's purpose to impeach the myth of male superiority?" (2001, p. 39).

This essay adds even further to Smith's contentions that Eliot's essay seeks to challenge the "myth of male superiority" (2001, p. 39) in that it highlights an arena in which Casaubon is clearly and directly inferior (in terms of his inability to write), and in which Dorothea is (albeit more subtly) superior.

A comparison of Casaubon's and Dorothea's letters of proposal and acceptance, respectively, provides a final example of Dorothea's success and Casaubon's failure as a writer. Eliot's own indictment of Casaubon's long-winded letter is clear when the narrator asks, "how could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love?" (Eliot, 1968, p. 32). Dorothea's letter of reply to Casaubon is penned in a very different manner than his. She remarks, within the letter itself, that, "if [she] said more, it would only be the same thing written out at greater length" (Eliot, 1968, p. 33). The brevity and clarity of Dorothea's note emphasizes the extent to which Casaubon's letter is verbose and convoluted. Moreover, the narrator notes that Dorothea wrote her reply "three times, not because she wished to change the wording, but because her hand was unusually uncertain, and she could not bear that Mr. Casaubon should think her handwriting bad and illegible" (Eliot, 1968, p.33). Again, Eliot couches the issue of writing in terms of penmanship (a woman's more typical province), but she questions the conventions involved. Dorothea's ardor gets in the way of her handwriting, but not of her "wording" (Eliot, 1968, p. 33). Moreover, Eliot thrice emphasizes Dorothea's connection to writing (and Casaubon's failure as a writer) by having her write the letter three times.

Importantly, Dorothea's writing is defined as personal and intimate (Casaubon has no personal words for her, as she does for him); full of ardor (making her hand tremble in love, though not in anger); and well done (she has no trouble with the "wording") (Eliot, 1968, p. 33). These qualities of Dorothea's writing distinguish her writing not only from Casaubon's, but also from the writings of the other characters in the novel. Even Will, who is presented as an artist and a writer for much of the novel, spends his life not in writing, but in being an "ardent public man" (Eliot, 1968, p. 610). As Patricia Johnson writes, he "abandons art for politics" whereas Dorothea "resists the male gaze and tries to see life for herself" (1997, p. 53). Instead, as Johnson argues, Dorothea "struggles to move beyond power, surveillance, or a narrowly-gendered subjectivity" (1997, p. 53). This struggle "offers the reader momentary access to a utopian, democratic vision that can represent women and men, and indeed the world, without reducing them to objects" (1997, p. 53). Dorothea's writing, as much as anything, enables her to transcend the restraints of her society.

## 5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the characteristics Eliot endows Dorothea's writing with are at once stereotypically feminine (her writing is motivated by love and intimacy) and stereotypically masculine (her writing grows out of ardor, and expresses vigor, force and energy). By combining the intimate with the powerful, and both with the act of writing, Eliot is also able to combine the typical province of women with the typical province of men in order to disrupt the conventions of both gender and genre and to locate the source of Dorothea's value in her ability to use the written word. She is the novel's true heroine, as well as its most authentic writer.

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