Middlemarch: Medieval Discourses and Will Ladislaw

JUDITH JOHNSTON

Present-day critics of George Eliot have glanced at, discussed, but given no undue significance to the medieval context in her work. Gillian Beer for instance lists mythological systems woven into Eliot's work which include troubadour romance, courtly love, hagiography and martyrology, and suggests that exploring the context of these systems will enhance our reading of Eliot's texts[1]. Earlier, Robert Preyer discussed the 'failure' of *Daniel Deronda* as attributable to the 'difficulty in handling ideas of this sort in works of realistic fiction'[2].

However, Eliot uses medieval discourses such as romance and religious allegory to modify areas in an apparently realistic text so that conflict may be expressed in manageable terms. Orderly conflict permits positive reaction which is followed by partial resolution. Resolution cannot be complete, in response to the transitional and incomplete nature of society, especially Eliot's pre-reform society, and this intimates that further positive changes are still to come.

In her characterization of Will Ladislaw, for instance, Eliot's use of these medieval discourses is very pronounced and they elaborate upon Will's metamorphic condition. In a religious allegory like *Piers Plowman* universal salvation will come about through individual salvation. So in *Middlemarch,* universal reformation will come about through individual reformation. Eliot's interest in Langland's allegory is confirmed by two entries from *Piers Plowman* in her notebooks. She records lines 53-57 from Passus X in the *Folger* notebook[3], and lines 55-57 from the Prologue to *Piers Plowman* in the Commonplace Book[4]. In the *Folger* notebook Eliot also records an extensive entry on medieval poetry, discussing the rule of alliteration in *Piers Plowman*

1 Gillian Beer, 'Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and *The Lifted Veil', This Particular Web,* ed. Ian Adam (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1975), p.104.

2 Robert Preyer, 'Beyond the Liberal Imagination: Vision and Unreality in *Daniel Deronda, Critics on George Eliot,* ed. William Baker (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), p.82. First published in *Victorian Studies* 4 (1960); 33-54.

3 J.. C. Pratt and V. A. Neufeldt, *George Eliot's Middlemarch Notebooks* (London: University of California Press, 1979), p.6. All subsequent references will use the abbreviations *Folger* or *Berg* and are to this edition.

4 Joseph Wiesenfarth, *A Writer's Notebook, 1854-1879 and Some Uncollected Writing* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1981), p.48. All subsequent references will use the abbreviation 'Commonplace Book' and are to this edition.

and the metre of Chaucer (pp.3-5).

Medieval analogues also occur in *Middlemarch* at moments of plot crisis in the narrative, or to signal a change in direction that will produce some type of reformation, no matter how slight. Often such analogues occur in epigraphs which head significant chapters. Because Eliot also wrote her own epigraphs, all these 'mottoes' as she calls them must be read as an integral part of the narrative, deliberately chosen or designed to add meaning and nuance to the text.

For instance, the four Chaucerian epigraphs Eliot uses contribute to the pattern of medieval analogues and discourses that recurs throughout *Middlemarch*. Three of these four epigraphs, used in *Middlemarch* for chapters 12, 21 and 65, appear in Eliot's Commonplace Book among a group of six quotations from *The Canterbury Tales*. There is also a list of the *Tales*. This list includes brief plot outlines and a note indicating whenever Chaucer's source is Boccaccio (pp.118-19). The *Berg* notebook and the 'Felix Holt Notebook' both duplicate the list, and the latter also duplicates the six quotations from the *Tales*[5].

Reform, by implication at least, looks back to the past. In that past Eliot discovers shaping discourses, allegory and romance, which share a common facility: metamorphosis. Each of these medieval discourses is flexible, capable of changing shape, of shifting from a type of realism, into fantasy, and sometimes back again. These discourses also yield a form of quest which is itself metamorphic. The protagonist, and the premises and conditions existing at the start of any quest, are irrevocably altered at its conclusion. Often this newly rendered form is implicit, found beyond the boundaries of the text itself.

Will Ladislaw is a character in a state of metamorphosis. He is an isolated, embryonic, alien figure in the Middlemarch landscape, and these factors alone confirm that the character of Will is conceived in the spirit of medieval allegory. Will needs to be reformed and relocated like other characters in the novel, notably Dorothea. His need of reform is therefore linked to the novel's major theme of Reform, built around and extending out from that one historical fact, the 1832 Reform Bill.

The ambiguity with which Will Ladislaw is characterized and read may account for the continual struggle critics have with Will's character, both inside and outside the text. An early review of *Middlemarch* by Henry James notes 'the insubstantial character of

5 George Eliot, Autograph Notebook for Felix Holt, Beinecke Microfilm 24, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, pp.149-152. All subsequent references will use the abbreviation 'Felix Holt Notebook' and are to this manuscript.

the hero. The figure of Will Ladislaw is a beautiful attempt . . . but . . . a failure. It lacks sharpness of outline and depth of colour, . . . he remains vague and impalpable to the end'[6]. Will resists definition because he is always just outside the parameters of society, always on his social and vocational quest. It is this element alone, this freedom, that makes him the natural choice for Dorothea at the novel's end. Compared to Sir James Chettam or Lydgate or even Casaubon, he is insubstantial, but he is also always flexible.

Will's characterization is not, however, illuminated solely by medieval allegory. Another trope accompanies that of allegory — medieval romance. Both medieval allegory and medieval romance are discourses linked to the quest mode and Will is definitively a character in quest of a vocation and some form of self-determination. This second trope, medieval romance, is used in a very particular and complex way, to highlight comically the weaknesses and shortcomings of the hero.

Much of the humour comes from the narrator's commentary which mocks the hero as he moves through various phases of transition towards the narrator's goal for him, his reformed state. The reader has only to contemplate the characterization of Daniel Deronda to understand how Eliot uses the chivalric mode in *Middlemarch* to free Ladislaw from the restrictions of the decorum so that his reform is in step with the new Victorian age. His reform will also be in step with the reformed Dorothea, whose prototype, Saint Theresa, rejects chivalry and romance.[7]

The narrator offers the first important description of Will Ladislaw, suggesting that he 'wore rather a pouting air of discontent' (p.104). Mr Brooke asks: 'What is your nephew going to do with himself, Casaubon? . . . In the way of a career, you know' (p.106). The question of vocation is always raised as an immediate one for the novel's chief characters. Responding, Casaubon condemns Will for a lack of accuracy, thoroughness and steady application, but Dorothea suggests that 'people may really have in them some vocation which is not quite plain to themselves, may they not? They may seem idle and weak because they are growing' (pp.107-8).

The narrator offers a more speculative description of Will that reinforces Dorothea's defence: 'We know what a masquerade all

6 Henry James in *George Eliot and her Readers: A Selection of Contemporary Reviews*, ed. John Holmstrom and Lawrence Lerner (London: Bodley Head, 1966), p.111. This is a review James wrote for *The Galaxy* in March 1873.

7 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2), (Harmondsworth: Penguin English Library, 1965), p.25. All subsequent references are to this edition.

development is, and what effective shapes may be disguised in helpless embryos' (p.109). The words *masquerade* and *disguise* suggest the complexities of allegory and help to confirm that much of Will's characterization depends upon didactive allegory. This mode, of which *Piers Plowman* is a kind, not only examines the individual but watches that individual's participation in the society and events that surround him. I do not suggest Eliot was writing an allegory in producing *Middlemarch*, only that Will's characterization depends upon an awareness of medieval allegory and its complexity. Eliot criticized those theorists who 'fall into the mistake of supposing that the conscious allegorizing of a modern can be a reproduction of what they acknowledge to be unconscious allegorizing in the ancients'[8].

U. C. Knoepflmacher, however, associates Will primarily with the 'will' of G. H. Lewes's *The Study of Psychology* (Lewes's 'will' becomes 'educable' and 'amenable to Moral law'), and neglects the earlier history of another 'Will' in Langland's *Piers Plowman*, where the circumstances and incidents of the journey are, eventually, more important than arrival. Knoepflmacher says of Will:

> He refuses to be fettered under obligations of any kind. Even his name assumes a special significance in a novel which pits "will" against the duties engendered by causal "laws". It is not surprising that the novelist's efforts to reduce this abstracted and multiform spirit into a concret figure should not be altogether successful.[9]

The fact that Will Ladislaw does *not* become a 'concrete figure' is allegorically correct, because he must remain malleable and flexible. The attainment of perfect understanding is simply not possible. If all ends in misty uncertainty, in gradations of imperfection, that is because the journey is continuous in 'the history of man' (p.25) from which far-off point Eliot begins *Middlemarch*.

The Vision of Piers Plowman, like the 'Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales*, has always been noted for its realism, and that realism does not solely embrace the manners and scenery of the medieval period in which the allegory was written. It is also important to recognize the realism with which human life is portrayed where Will the Dreamer's questing is a continuum of failure and forgiveness, failure and forgiveness. The quester's attainments are often qualified and at times even overturned because of his lack of knowledge and

8 George Eliot, Mackay's "Progress of the Intellect", *Westminster Review* LIV (1851), 382.

9 U. C. Knoepflmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p.100.

understanding — gaps which the mentors he meets along the way attempt to mend for him.

As a religious allegory, *Piers Plowman* has one immediate object theological truth[10]. While Eliot's object is not theological truth, it is still truth, or choosing the 'right' way, that governs the free will. J. A. Burrow says of the author of *Piers Plowman,* 'Thus Will Langland introduces himself into his poem both as a moral agent (will); and as an object of moral censure (wilfulness)' (pp.44-45). Will Ladislaw's 'pouting air of discontent' certainly suggests that he too, at the beginning of *Middlemarch*, personifies wilfulness. Casaubon finds Will not 'submissive to ordinary rule' (p.107) and 'self-indulgent' (p.107), yet agrees to fund a trip to Italy where Will may be 'tried by the test of freedom' (p.107).

Eliot may have read Richard Price's 'Note on the Vision of Pierce Plowman' in Warton's *History of English Poetry*[11]. This Note explicates Burrow's moral agent (will) and moral censure (wilfulness). Warton himself opens his discussion of *Piers Plowman* by saying:

> This poem contains a series of distinct visions, which the author imagines himself to have seen, while he was sleeping, after a long ramble on Malverns-hills in Worcestershire. (II: p.44)

Just like Will Langland, Will Ladislaw is the free agent who roams the pages of *Middlemarch*, his experiences giving shape to Eliot's vision of the provincial life of the early 1830s. Eugene Hollahan suggests that

> in being central to the unifying plot of *Middlemarch* the enigmatic Will is central to the theme of this vast narrative structure. But simply, the theme is that in a time of cultural change and fragmentation, a time when widely sanctioned guiding visions have disappeared, the individual's innate desire for wholeness forces him to devise his own vision of a complete life.[12]

From here to the end of the article, Hollahan uses variations on the word *vision* six more times, suggesting that Will can combine 'a worldly smattering of various bits of knowledge with a constructive power for envisioning a primary unifying involvement in a single field of activity' (p.457).

10 J. A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and Their Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.20. All subsequent references are to this edition.

11 Thomas Warton, *The History of English Poetry*, 3 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg, 1840), II, p.61. These notes remained in the 1840 edition which Eliot owned and which was edited by Richard Taylor.

12 Eugene Hollahan, 'The Concept of "Crisis" in *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 28 (1974), 456.

I doubt whether Will has such visionary power to this extent: surely the constructive power and the vision are all Eliot's. What Will illustrates, as the other Will did in the Middle English poem, is the need to seek solid knowledge, in the language of the people, that eventually will permit visionary reform to take some realistic shape. Universal salvation in *Piers Plowman* begins with individual salvation. Universal reform in *Middlemarch* begins with individual reform. Michael Mason points out that in *Middlemarch* 'the future is present in the novel by implication'[13]. Thus while individual reform may be accomplished, universal reform is still to come.

The unrealized dream or vision encapsulates a theme which recurs throughout *Middlemarch*. It is the striving towards fulfilment of a vision that counts, not necessarily attainment of it. It is possible to be 'foundress of nothing' (p.26) because the energy channelled into attempting fulfilment takes on a valuable shape of its own. Eliot wrote to John Blackwood on 27 April 1866:

> There is one passage of prophecy which I longed to quote, but I thought it wiser to abstain; 'Now, the beauty of the Reform Bill is, that under the mature operation the people must and will become free agents' — a prophecy which I hope is true, only the maturity of the operation has not arrived yet.[14]

At exactly the point of his reintroduction into the novel in chapter 19, Will, arguing with Naumann about art, makes his statement that

> 'Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection'.

This is one of Will's typically ambiguous statements. But in it he supports the notion that an indefinite image is free to be interpreted in whatever way you will. 'True seeing' is the individual's vision or interpretation that is many-faceted, not merely a surface representation of certain details.

13 Michael Mason, '*Middlemarch* and History', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25 (1971), 425.

14 Gordon S. Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-5; 1978), IV, p.248. All subsequent references will use the abbreviation *Letters* and are to this edition. Eliot recorded the full passage from the *Times* (3 October 1832) in the "Felix Holt Notebook":
Now the beauty of the Reform Bill is, that under its mature operation the people must and will become free agents, and the enemies of freedom were masters enough of the question to be sure that this must be the final result of this great measure, or they would never have resisted its enactment with so much pertinacity for the last two years.

The opening paragraph of chapter 19 discusses a new mode, German Romanticism. Naumann's dismissal of Will as 'dilettantish and amateurish' (p.221) disassociates him from this new mode and he too is 'all the better for being vague', or undefined. It is a brilliant move on Eliot's part. Will is left unstamped as it were, mere clay, to be formed by the events in the novel. Eliot's earlier reference to 'Helpless embryos' now has added meaning. Note too Will's alienation in Middlemarch, his 'foreign' antecedents which give cause for concern in that provincial society. Yet it is this very factor which permits him to function not only in an allegorical way, not only in a Comtean or determinist way, but as one who propels the events of the novel forward. Like Will the Dreamer in *Piers Plowman*, Will Ladislaw is always on the move, always learning, always growing: never learned, never fully grown. He comes and goes 'at will' — his very restlessness a part of the characterization of a creature in a state of metamorphosis.

Langland's medieval Dreamer is isolated within the text of the poem. His collisions and failures, and the poem's steady stripping away from him of material comfort and general well-being, emphasize that alienation. In the Prologue to the poem he is dressed in sheepskins, but by Passus VIII is robed in coarse woollen cloth. In the Prologue he has a marvellous dream but by Passus VIII awakes almost witless. Similarly, the narrator of *Middlemarch* is well aware of her Will's isolated state: 'There are characters which are continually creating collisions and nodes for themselves in dramas which nobody is prepared to act with them' (p.223). As the narrative of *Middlemarch* proceeds there is also a gradual stripping away of all Will Ladislaw's comfort and well-being. Yet it is these accumulating privations that change him from the dilettantish 'youngster' (p.104) to the 'ardent public man' of the novel's end (p.894). Will's condition begins to change at his next meeting with Dorothea who is on her honeymoon in Rome.

Rome and Mr Casaubon are both 'visible history' (p.224) and for Dorothea, married life has become as weighty as 'unintelligible Rome'. Yet the epigraph to this chapter (21) comes not from the Latin classics as we could perhaps have expected. Instead, once again a key turning-point in the plot of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's first private conversation with Will, is marked by a medieval analogue. The epigraph Eliot selects from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* comes from 'The Physician's Tale' and reads:

> Hire facounde eke full womanly and plain,
> No contrefeted termes had she
> To semen wise. Chaucer

Eliot's choice was deliberated upon, and the lines appear in both her Commonplace and 'Felix Holt' notebooks. Eugene Hollahan suggests that

> The plot of *Middlemarch*, with its clear representative event, defining event, functional halfway point, crisis, culminating event, and climax, is generated by the character, decisions, and actions of Will Ladislaw. This plot is initiated in chapter 22 when, during their private conversation in Rome, Will surprises Dorothea by announcing that he is freeing himself from Causaubon's generosity. (p.453)

However, the major plot event is initiated in chapter 21 when Will puts into words what Casaubon has already feared Dorothea will observe about his life's work. What had until now not occurred to her is clearly articulated and from this point all her observations will indeed carry a 'malign inference' (p.233) culminating in her refusal to be bound to the *Key* after Casaubon's death. The events in chapter 22 actually stem from this pivotal chapter, 21.

Consider, for instance, how Will recognizes the static romance heroine in Dorothea, while at the same time the analogy is a humorous one:

> She must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage. And if Mr Casaubon had been a dragon who had carried her off to his lair with his talons simply and without legal forms, it would have been an unavoidable feat of heroism to release her and fall at her feet. But he was something more unmanageable than a dragon: he was a benefactor with collective society at his back. (p.241)

However, despite the humour, Will's decision to free himself from obligation to Casaubon stems from this view of Casaubon's marriage to Dorothea. Will takes the first step towards self-determination.

Chaucer's source for the tale of Virginia, which the Physician tells, is Livy's *History,* Book III, which makes it, of course, a Roman tale[15]. It is not coincidence that a tale from Rome keys us into events in Rome. Eliot gave considerable attention to her choice of epigraphs. The *Quarry for Middlemarch* contains two quotations from Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess,* under consideration for use as epigraphs in *Middlemarch*[16]. The second of these reads:

> In all her face (no) wicked signe
> For it was sad, simple and benigne (11.917-18)

15 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Works* (1957; London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p.727.

16 Anna Kitchel, *Quarry for Middlemarch* (1950; London: Authorised Facsimile. University Microfilms International, 1980), p.33.

Kitchel did not give the source for these lines from Chaucer which I located in the dream vision poem. Obviously Eliot was thinking carefully about what epigraph to use, and the similarities in tone would indicate that she specifically wished to use lines from Chaucer. Her final choice, with its added nuances of source and locale, with its emphasis on the voice rather than the face, shows how carefully her decision was made.

The lines of the epigraph are, in Chaucer's tale, incorporated into a description of Virginia's maidenly virtues, yet it is interesting that it is her eloquence, her 'facounde' and her plain honest speech, 'no contrefeted termes', that Eliot decides to focus upon in a list of virtues that were for the most part commonplace in treatises on virginity. Eliot's choice is also important because the chapter is pivotal in establishinng Dorothea's relationship with Will Ladislaw against her newly-married relationship with Casaubon. It is Dorothea's voice that attracts Will at their first meeting — 'It was like the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp' (p.105) — and in his discussion with Naumann about art in chapter 19, Will has asked: 'This woman whom you have just seen, for example: how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her' (p.222).

It is Dorothea's simplicity and directness of speech that wins Will to a like frankness. For instance, when she explains to him her feelings about art it is a lexical set on ignorance which dominates: *ignorant, ignorance* (twice), *dulness, stupid,* culminating in *blind* (p.238). In parenthesis the narrator comments, '(It was impossible now to doubt the directness of Dorothea's confession)' (p.238).

The epigraph from 'The Physician's Tale' is the only abstract one from Chaucer that Eliot uses in *Middlemarch*. The description is of an ideal, rather than an ordinary girl. In the tale proper, Virginia's beauty is described as a gift of Fortune which becomes her misfortune, an irony to be compared with Eliot questioning 'whether Providence has taken equal care of Miss Brooke in presenting her with Mr Casaubon' (p.313). In Higdon's article on Eliot's use of the epigraph, he suggests that she fuses the modes of realism and allegory, 'enabling the author to ground abstract concerns firmly and concretely in the particulars of life'[17].

In this chapter, for instance, the choice of an epigraph from a Middle English writer might merely suggest that Dorothea's passivity begins

17 David Higdon, 'George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25 (1970), 139-40.

with her marriage. These lines from Chaucer particularly could suggest this. Yet Eliot has focussed on the elements that win Will to Dorothea, her voice and her honesty. These are the 'true' elements of her character which, because he is a quester seeking 'truth', he is able to recognize. Casaubon has only imagined an ideal girl as suggested by the abstract virtues of an ideal Virginia.

The meeting between Will and Dorothea in *Middlemarch* proves to be a turning-point for them both. If Will Ladislaw activates Dorothea, it is their mutual love that lends his life the direction it needs. At this point in the narrative he is still only on the threshold, and in hasty reaction to Dorothea's comparison of himself with Mr Casaubon's 'power of persevering devoted labour' (p.239) he tells her that this vaunted labour is wasted, 'for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world. If Mr Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble' (p.240). Will has provided the impetus here, shifting the conversation from the problems of art to the problems of life. Dorothea feels for her husband 'the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams' (p.242).

The shift Dorothea makes from dreams to reality is the shift from the abstract Virginia to a realistic Dorothea. As Joseph Wiesenfarth points out: 'Dorothea's wedding journey is a journey into knowledge in which she loses the innocence described in the epigraph from Chaucer in chapter 21, which suggests she is not worldly wise.'[18] The epigraph, however, only suggests that Dorothea never pretends to a knowledge she does not possess. What is more, with Will Dorothea is free simply to say whatever she thinks — she needs to use no 'contrefeted termes'. Indeed, the epigraph from Chaucer does not describe innocence, but rather, and almost surprisingly, considering the context of the virginal Virginia, intimates maturity and sense with the words 'full womanly and plain'. This maturity in Dorothea is a feature of her relationship with Will. From the very beginning it is Dorothea who takes precedence and it is from Dorothea that Will eventually gains maturity himself.

Will recognizes that Dorothea 'must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage' (p.241), indicating that a successful marriage in this novel cannot be idealistic. Jenni Calder suggests of Will that 'There is little indication that he understands Dorothea's personality or is interested in her ideas, which again undermines any

18 Joseph Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot's Mythmaking* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1977), p.200.

picture of their marriage as one of idealistic fulfilment'[19]. No critic could be certain of finding in the text any indication that the eventual marriage of Dorothea and Will has to be idealistic. It is Utopian, perhaps, in the way the woman's role is altered, but the marriage itself is never meant to be an ideal one, in fact, may even be the quarter in which Dorothea incurs martyrdom after all (p.30).

Will considers traditional, courtly rescue of Dorothea — 'it would have been an unavoidable feat of heroism to release her' (p.241) — but his chivalry is comically undercut when the dragon enters the room in the shape of Mr Casaubon, 'in all the unimpeachable correctness of his demeanour' (p.241). By contrast, Will himself is a creature in a state of change:

> the first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression. Surely, his very features changed their form; his jaw looked sometimes large and sometimes small; and the little ripple in his nose was a preparation for metamorphosis. (p.241)

Will's flexibility in the choice of roles for himself is contrasted to Casaubon's rigidity.

For the moment the role of courtly knight is not enacted and Will is left open to adopt any number of generic roles. By emphasizing his metamorphic state, Eliot indicates that this role is as yet incomplete, and his condition still embryonic. But the intention seems clear: to turn him into a 'real' person, still a hero of sorts, but without a halo[20]. The very factor critics find so unsatisfactory in Will's characterization, his imperfection, is the same factor which marks the marriage to Dorothea as realistic.

If Dorothea is to achieve active self-determination, she cannot be reduced to passivity again by a chivalrous hero. Willene Pursell suggests that

> Even at the farthest reaches of his imagination Will keeps to the path of courtly love. His feeling for Dorothea is kept in motion entirely by the impetus of his

19 Jenni Calder, *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p.151.

20 Joseph Wiesenfarth, in *A Writer's Notebook*, translates an entry Eliot made from Villemarqué's *Contes Populaires des anciens Bretons* as follows:
The Welsh have two historical poems from the sixth century which concern themselves with a Cambrian leader named Arthur, who really existed . . .. There is nothing marvellous about him. . . . I think *The Triades* wanted to turn the mythological Arthur into a real person; he is still the hero of the ancient poets but quite without his halo.

> love, which is courtly and adulterous in the medieval tradition.[21]

Pursell fails to consider how comic Eliot's use of the courtly love discourse is, and how this humour is expressed by Will's gothic depiction of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon:

> A man was bound to know himself better than that, and if he chose to grow grey crunching bones in a cavern, he had no business to be luring a girl into his companionship. 'It is the most horrible of virgin sacrifices,' said Will; and he painted to himself what were Dorothea's inward sorrows as if he had been writing a choric wail. (pp.395-6)

The narrator accuses Will of 'a "passionate prodigality" of statement' (p.396), poking fun while undermining the literary pretensions in this particular aspect of his relationship with Dorothea. What is more, Eliot emphasizes her point by reminding the reader that the phrase 'passionate prodigality' is 'Sir Thomas Browne's phrase' (p.396) and is, itself, literary.

In another literary and ironic simile, the narrator suggests that Will is impatient with the slow development of his relationship with Dorothea, saying:

> However slight the terrestrial intercourse between Dante and Beatrice or Petrarch and Laura, time changes the proportion of things, and in later days it is preferable to have fewer sonnets and more conversation. (p.397)

Despite this, when the two do chance to be alone together, Will's courtly recognition of Dorothea as 'a creature worthy to be perfectly loved' (p.398) inspires the narrator to add that 'I think his own feelings at that moment were perfect, for we mortals have our divine moments, when love is satisfied in the completeness of the beloved object' (p.398). Allegorically and realistically, perfection is unattainable — but fleeting moments of perfection are possible.

Dorothea's puritan appearance is emphasized at the same time, as she is seen 'looking in her plain dress of some thin woollen-white material, without a single ornament on her besides her wedding-ring, as if she were under a vow to be different from all other women' (p.398) Dorothea's appearance suggests still the virgin nun, caught in passivity. She reveals to Will her need to be active: 'The use I should like to make of my life would be to help some one who did great works, so that his burthen might be lighter' (p.399). And in another gothic image this revelation of the reason for her marriage makes Will think irritably

21 Willene Van Loenen Pursell, *Love and Marriage in Three English Authors: Chaucer, Milton and Eliot* (Stanford: Honors Essay in Humanities No. VII, 1963), p.48. All subsequent references are to this edition.

of 'beautiful lips kissing holy skulls and other emptinesses ecclesiastically enshrined' (p.399). This poetic alliteration, and polysyllabic vocabulary, mocks and emphasizes the excessiveness of his imagery, echoing the excess of gothic novels. The gothic conjures themes of incarceration and duress connived at through the offices of the church which the virginal description of Dorothea, so like the Miss Brooke of chapter 1, does nothing to dissipate.

The medieval stasis of Dorothea's pose at the beginning of this scene (p.398) expresses the self-imposed restraint she comes to place upon her words and actions habitually in deference to her husband. The subtle balancing of Will's reaction, which is again 'passionate prodigality', against the very real repression which Dorothea suffers, is a way of allowing the reader to visualize an oppression that is intellectual rather than physical. Because the narrator mocks and places these reactions in Will's mouth, she cannot be accused of melodramatic treatment of her heroine. Eliot has, as Pursell suggests, placed Will on the path of courtly love. But she uses the discourse to mock him, while paradoxically that mockery reveals what elements in him are worthwhile. At the same time, the reduction of the hero emphasizes his allegorical role in *Middlemarch*.

Eliot uses the medieval chivalric analogue to mock Will but also to ensure that when he emerges from his embryonic condition he will not be a brilliant hero, casting the heroine into a subordinate role. Instead he willl be an ordinary man with realistic virtues and realistic limitations. Compare the 'heroes' of Tennyson's *The Princess* who have invaded her 'University' disguised as women. They emerge from their female garments like butterflies from cocoons:

> From what was left of faded women-slough
> To sheathing splendours and the golden scale
> Of harness, issued in the sun that now
> Leapt from the dewy shoulders of the Earth,
> And hit the northern hills.[22]

The phrase 'faded woman-slough' denigrates the female role, while the brilliancy of the male image is reinforced by the primitive mythical and sexual connotations of 'sheathing splendours' and 'golden scale of harness'. Tennyson's Princess, in abject contrast, is become a

> Pitiful sight, wrapt in a soldier's cloak
> Like some sweet sculpture draped from head to foot,

22 Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess: A Medley* (London: Moxon, 1848), p.96. Eliot owned the 1847 first edition. See Part V, lines 38-42.

> And pushed by rude hands from its pedestal,
> All her fair length upon the ground she lay.
> (Part V, 11.53-56)

The men spring from their women's clothing,vibrant and powerful, but the male garment on the princess only weighs her down and emphasizes her failure. The image of the displaced statue, synonymous with the destruction of great cities and civilizations, denotes the end of her dream of a College for Women. The element of disguise, of gender and role-swapping in the poem contributes to failure on both sides to reach a compromise. The men are counterfeit women: the women, counterfeit men.

By contrast, in *Middlemarch*, it is the lack of disguise, of counterfeit between them, which draws Will and Dorothea together. In this 'true' relationship, Dorothea rescues Will from his own moral wilfulness, and he permits Dorothea to emerge from the stasis which her marriage to Casaubon has forced her to adopt. In the self-restraint she exercises upon herself, Dorothea disguises her true self to become more the wife her husband wants. When he dies, she is conscious of never having achieved the ideal state he wished for and feels obliged to wear cumbersome, excessive widow's weeds in a form of expiation, like the princess in defeat weighed down by male drapery. Dorothea's passivity during her marriage is often evoked by associating her with statuary.

Eliot composed the poem 'Armgart' (1870) during the period she was writing *Middlemarch*. Kathleen Blake compares the situation of the heroine Armgart to that of Dorothea, pointing out how Armgart's

> feeling of impotence is beautifully captured in the image of the classical statue whose every line expresses energy but energy that cannot touch its mark because the instrumental arms are missing:
>
> A will
> That, like an arm astretch and broken off,
> Has nought to hurl — the torso of a soul.[23]

In Dorothea's relationship with Casaubon her 'will' which determines choice of action, has been broken off. With Will Ladislaw, her 'will' becomes active again. Because Dorothea has early emerged from a state of 'moral stupidity' (p.243), we may assume she is capable of acting upon 'an object of moral censure'[24], that is, Will Ladislaw. In the many associations of Dorothea with saints,[25] the same contrast

23 Kathleen Blake, '*Middlemarch* and the Woman Question', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 31 (1976-77), 296-7. All subsequent references are to this article.

24 J. A. Burrow, *Medieval Writers and Their Work*, pp.44-5.

25 Saints Dorothea, Theresa, Barbara, Clara and Catherine of Alexandria.

emerges as that evoked by 'Armgart'. The Saints' Lives of actual achievement are contrasted to the immutable iconography which is all that remains of them.

In eventually choosing a vocation which serves the people, Will serves Dorothea best by taking up the very vocation she would herself embrace. Blake has pointed out that this conclusion is not as unsatisfactory as it sounds, reminding readers that the importance of the novel being set in the period of Reform should be considered a 'given'. Blake continues:

> Dorothea, through a husband who works for this passage, contributes something to a movement that is not defeated and that qualifies, as much as Saint Theresa's reform of a religious order, as a 'far-resonant action'. (p.309)

To read Dorothea's marriage to Will as a 'happy ending' in which Dorothea's greatest achievement is 'a successful romantic love resulting in a good marriage'[26], or as failed feminist writing, ignores Eliot's use of the medieval discourses, romance and allegory, with which she expresses the possibility of change, both in the condition of women, and in the relationships between women and men. Eliot's protagonists emerge from the mediating space provided by the medieval discourses into a realistic mode which suggests a successful negotiation betwen genres and genders.

26 Willene Pursell, *Love and Marriage in Three English Authors*, p.54.