

Whose Middlemarch?
The 1994 British Broadcasting Corporation
Television Production

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The BBC television serialization of *Middlemarch* was a major media event in the United Kingdom at the beginning of 1994. Commentators put it about that it was a do-or-die effort: the BBC classic serial was in danger, because costume drama had been decreed to be obsolete, part of the dowdy Auntie Beeb stereotype, no longer good for ratings. And so with a budget of over £6 million for six episodes, making six and a half hours of viewing, and considerable promotion, *Middlemarch* went to air in January 1994 (and was shown later in the year in North America, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere).¹

Its success was never in doubt. In one week *Middlemarch* was seen by 5.5 million viewers, rating high among BBC2's programs, and topping the paperback bestseller list. Penguin Classics took the opportunity to send off W. J. Harvey's now venerable (1965) edition of *Middlemarch* with a TV tie-in cover, and to issue a new Penguin Classic edition, prepared by Rosemary Ashton, a leading British George Eliot scholar. In the United States, a revamped Modern Library edition, with a foreword by the novelist A. S. Byatt, came out. Ashton also had a major part in the BBC's production of a two-hour television documentary on George Eliot and her fiction, in which Byatt appeared along with other critics and commentators. Another programme on 'The Making of *Middlemarch*' dwelt on the logistics of transforming modern-day Stamford into 'Middlemarch' in the 1820s by such devices as adding a suitably aged fibreglass portico to the Arts and Tourist Information Centre to turn it into the White Hart Hotel; hiding telephone cables, letter boxes, exhaust fans, and

1 *Middlemarch* was a co-production of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Boston, Mass., Public Broadcasting System, 1994. Script: Andrew Davies. Director: Anthony Page. Producer: Louis Marks.

aerials; and resurfacing the road with specially selected gravel laid over plastic sheeting. BBC Education put out *Screening Middlemarch*, a multi-media resource pack (video, audio cassette and workbook), 'specifically designed' to illustrate 'how the 19th century novel was made into a 90s television serial', and *Middlemarch: A Viewer's Guide*, a promotional booklet offering enlightenment about such topics as 'The greatest novel in the English language', 'An unconventional life' and 'Making *Middlemarch* live'.

The tourism industry flourished. Publicity by Lincolnshire and South Humberside Tourism included a leaflet, 'Stamford, Lincolnshire, England: BBC's Middlemarch'. Stamford and Rutland Cultural Tours launched a series of 'Middlemarch Heritage Tours' round the settings used for filming. George Eliot's Middlemarch was in fact Coventry, already an industrial complex when she knew it in the 1830s and 1840s, not nearly as picturesque as Stamford, a mellow Georgian wool town and staging post on the Great North Road. However Coventry was in a position to affirm its long-standing claims to be Middlemarch, home of Warwickshire's second most famous author. The choice of Stamford as setting was a necessary fiction, and the town looks more elegant than its fictional counterpart is likely to have done, just as the costumes while right for period detail, are all either wardrobe-fresh or ostentatiously ragged. The various out-of-Middlemarch settings—Stragglethorpe Hall as Stone Court, Culverthorpe Hall as Tipton Grange, Grimsthorpe Castle as Quallingham, and so on—were all splendidly chosen, making clearly the novel's understated points about rank and social gradation (as do the range of accents of the characters). In this version, Celia's remonstrating with Dorothea about her decision to marry Ladislaw—'How can you always live in a street?'²—has full force.

What would George Eliot have thought of this treatment of her most famous novel? I suspect she might well have

² *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-2; Penguin, ed. Rosemary Ashton, 1994), p.821. All page references are to this edition.

countenanced, perhaps even encouraged the enterprise, especially if her partner and manager George Henry Lewes had been able to strike a suitable deal. She was always mindful of market forces, and indeed *Middlemarch* first appeared in an innovative serial form, eight half-volume parts issued between December 1871 and December 1872, immediately followed by the four-volume first edition of December 1872. Leaving such impertinent conjectures aside, however, I think the achievement of this television version of *Middlemarch* is that it develops an authentic reading of the novel.

The scriptwriter, Andrew Davies, with credits ranging from the comedy series *A Very Peculiar Practice* to political dramas like *House of Cards* and *To Play the King*, was not daunted by the impossible task of bringing so long and complex a novel to the screen. Indeed, he proclaimed 'a private and arrogant conviction that, in some ways, a dramatic adaptation might actually enhance the story',³ and elsewhere referred to the process of adapting other people's work as 'asset-stripping'.⁴ Such rhetoric, anathema to some, amounts a thoroughgoing assertion of the different demands of different genres.

Davies's reading of the novel works from the celebrated moment at the beginning of chapter 29:

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea - but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? (p. 278)

And so the narrating voice turns the reader from comfortable indignation about Casaubon's cruelty to this young wife to the recognition that Casaubon too has been disappointed in the marriage. It is precisely the narrating voice—or rather, the polyphonic play of voices in the text—that the serialization cannot replicate. The 'Prelude' to the novel puts a set of questions about vocation and woman's lot, couched as

³ 'In Bed with George Eliot', *Evening Standard*, 2 September 1993.

⁴ 'Question: who is the author of Middlemarch?', *Sunday Times*, 16 January 1994. I recognize that there are unexplored theoretical implications of the privileging of the novel in my discussion.

reflections on the career of St Theresa of Avila, which never find their way into the screen version. Indeed, the spiritual dimension of the novel, and its concern with religion, are generally downplayed. The significance of the confrontation over the hospital chaplaincy becomes one of largely of personal influence, suppressing the extent to which there is an issue about the cure of souls as a complement to the cure of bodies in the new fever hospital. And while the description of Miss Brooke which opens chapter 1 can be translated to a visual image of a young woman who is attractive but dressed in a subdued fashion, the climate of opinion so adroitly summed up in the observation 'She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common sense' (p. 7) cannot so readily be recreated.

The commonest criticism I have encountered of the TV *Middlemarch* concerns the absence of a narrating voice, or of 'George Eliot'. The lament was frequently accompanied by a comparison with Joanne Woodward's voice-over narration in Martin Scorsese's film *The Age of Innocence*. In that context, the character of the narrator in Edith Wharton's novel is appropriately projected: a presence outside the action, offering commentary on it. The narration of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, as I have suggested, is not univocal. Its complexity could not easily be distilled, and the decision not to give the narrator a voice was in my view the right one. Only in the closing minutes of the TV adaptation is 'the voice of George Eliot' heard, when Judi Dench delivers a slightly edited version of the 'Finale'. Despite what U.C. Knoepfelmacher has described as 'the prosaic condensation and emendation of those exquisite last sentences',⁵ the effect of this voice-over is singular. It disengages us by placing an intermediary between viewers and the action, distancing us

⁵ For instance, 'Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth' (p. 838) becomes 'Her full nature spent itself in deeds of no great name'. Knoepfelmacher's comment is in '*Middlemarch* on TV - A Symposium', *George Eliot- George Henry Lewes Studies*, 26-27 (1994), 48.

from the Dorothea we have known, and all that we have come to see her represent, as we watch her carry her books upstairs into the gloom. At this point are asserted the centrality both of Dorothea and the particular issues of women's education and ambition refracted through her situation. Those who felt the feminist agenda of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* betrayed by the adaptation might look again at this sequence.

Not all of the narrator's words are dropped from the adaptation, however. At times, Davies subsumes them into dialogue: for example, when Dorothea utters some of the famous passage on her weeping in Rome in chapter 20 ('If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence' - p. 194), there is a fitting sense of the character accessing the sympathetic articulation of her plight in the text.

At the outset, the adaptation tacitly asks 'why always Dorothea?' The first episode opens with a stagecoach coming at a good clip through the countryside. As it passes some navvies working on a cutting, one of the passengers points and exclaims 'The future!' Thus the notion of disruption associated with the railways, and some sense of the march of progress, is introduced (though the interpenetration through the novel of the time of the narration, around 1870, after the passage of the Second Reform Bill in 1867, and the time narrated, around 1830, in the lead-up to the First Reform Bill of 1832, cannot be preserved). The speaker turns out to be the young doctor, Tertius Lydgate, arriving to his newly purchased practice in Middlemarch. Lydgate's sonorous 'The future!' is a good example of the broadbrush approach to change in the novel. 'We want the Bill, the whole Bill, nothing but the Bill' reads a placard held aloft during Mr Brooke's election speech. The basis of the demand for reform is not spelled out, but dramatized for instance in the interaction between Mr Brooke and his tenant Dagley, whose son has been caught poaching, which brings home the inequities that

require reform more effectively than Will Ladislaw's editorializing.

Davies was forthright about his reasons for recasting the opening:

If I had followed the text more faithfully the first twenty minutes would have been spent on two rich young women sitting in a big house with too much money and too little to do, wondering who they were going to marry. Entertaining perhaps, but it's not what Eliot's about. You have to look at the big picture.⁶

To open the dramatization with Lydgate's arrival is to foreground the novel's concern with Middlemarch as a provincial community confronting outsiders. Dorothea and Celia are relative newcomers, though the Brooke family is well established there; and Lydgate, Ladislaw, the sinister Raffles, even, years ago, the banker Bulstrode—all come from the outside. The young men bring not only metropolitan but cosmopolitan experience associated with their zeal for medical and political reform. They have kinds of knowledge which Middlemarch finds hard to accommodate. The last images are of the coach driving away again, with a flock of sheep spilling over the road behind it. Lydgate is left behind, destroyed by Middlemarch, in a fulfilment of the implicit prediction that closes the account of the formation of his character and ambition in chapter 15: 'Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably' (p. 154). (The 'Finale' reveals that Rosamond does have her way, and Lydgate dies at fifty, a fashionable London physician.) The final images of the adaptation proffer a pastoral scene, undisturbed by the drama of society. It allows a nostalgia which George Eliot's novel does not tolerate. For all the good things about Davies's version, it has none of the radicalism of George Eliot's text.

The characterizations in the TV *Middlemarch* (59 speaking parts and 1500 extras) were never less than worthy,

⁶ 'Question: who is the author of Middlemarch?', *Sunday Times*, 16 January 1994.

and sometimes inspired. Generally, the eccentric and grotesque were most admired, with Robert Hardy's splendid Mr Brooke a runaway winner. Sir Michael Hordern did a Dickensian Peter Featherstone, more a redeemable Scrooge than a totally nasty Smallweed, and Elizabeth Sprigge portrayed sharp-tongued and tight-fisted Mrs Cadwallader in a memorable but rather too upholstered fashion. The contrast with the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate provided by Mary Garth (strong-featured Rachel Power) and her two suitors, Fred Vincy (Jonathan Firth, one of the few of the cast who looked exactly as I'd always imagined the character) and Mr Farebrother (Simon Chandler), is sharp. Douglas Hodge's Lydgate had some fine moments, especially in his dealings with Peter Jeffrey's chilling Bulstrode, and so did Trevyn McDowell's concupiscent Rosamond, though she did not quite capture the fatal combination of obstinacy and silliness in 'the flower of Mrs Lemon's school' (p. 96: however, her striking physical resemblance to Mrs Vincy was a fine touch). It was possible to see why Dorothea might be attracted both to Patrick Malahide's Casaubon (although he lacked the white moles so repugnant to Celia), and to Rufus Sewell's brooding Ladislaw. Juliet Aubrey as Dorothea grew, and our understanding of her ramified, as the series progressed from her idealistic dreams and her principled but painful acceptance of duty, to her prospects of happiness with Ladislaw and awareness of the limitations on her ambitions. Among the many small touches that enriched *Middlemarch* on TV were Dorothea's shortsightedness, literal and metaphorical, requiring spectacles, and both Lydgate and Dorothea being left-handed.

Perhaps because so much of the novel is narratorial commentary and reflection, surprisingly little incident is dispensed with completely. Mr Farebrother's female relations are not a great loss, though I regret not seeing Rosamond Vincy at her netting. The additions are generally harmonious: thus the wedding of Rosamond and Lydgate contrasts with Featherstone's funeral, and reinforces the presentation of community. As much cannot be said for the

Lygates' bedroom scenes, which reduce Lydgate's 'spots of commonness' (p. 150) to an uncontrollable sex drive.

Modifications of the novel were mostly thoughtful and consistent. I will comment on two occasions, both crises for Dorothea, where the televised version reworks the imagery of interior and exterior, light and darkness, of the novel. In the opening sequence, along with the coach and a mob of sheep we see a family on the tramp, part of the fabric of rural life. Viewers familiar with the novel might see here a hint of Dorothea's experience after her night vigil in chapter 80, where she admits to herself her love for Ladislaw: in the dawn she looks down from her boudoir window on 'a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby', and feels 'the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life...' (p. 788). In the series, she greets them as she is walking out in the early morning. The novel's point about Dorothea's enclosure made by the succession of scenes in her green-blue boudoir at Lowick is blunted, but her going outdoors visually enacts her release into fuller life. At this point in the novel, she explicitly puts off her heavy mourning (p. 789), a decision wordlessly picked up in the adaptation by her wearing a coloured shawl when she goes again to see Rosamond.

Similarly, the imagery of Dorothea and Will's coming together in chapter 83 of the novel is reworked for the screen. The amazing thunderstorm that accompanies Dorothea's declaration of her love to Will in the library at Lowick is omitted. Instead, the novel's insistence on Will as a creature of light is developed in a scene in which Dorothea is in sunlight, cutting dead heads from daisies, when Will comes and she reaches out to him.

Such intelligent revisions kept me caught up in the television production. Andrew Davies's *Middlemarch* is not George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, but it is a reading of the novel for Britain at the end of the twentieth century.