“INCONSISTENT” DESIRE: SELF-GOVERNMENT AND AGE-DISPARATE MARRIAGE IN GEORGE ELIOT’S MIDDLEMARCH

By

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by

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“INCONSISTENT” DESIRE: SELF-GOVERNMENT AND AGE-DISPARATE
MARRIAGE IN GEORGE ELIOT’S MIDDLEMARCH

By

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Though George Eliot’s Middlemarch is canonical, and therefore heavily analyzed in the years since it was published in Britain in 1871-1872, elements of this novel have remained thus far unexplored. This study explores Dorothea Brooke’s struggle to come to terms with her desires—whether socially inappropriate such as an interest in intellectual development and having a large and meaningful impact on her community, or personally troubling such as those that express her innate sensuality. Dorothea’s struggle to be at peace with and realize her desires is highlighted and brought to crisis within her marriage to her much older first husband, illustrating just how problematic both her relationship to her own desires and her attempt to express them through an age-disparate pairing can be. This union, while socially acceptable due to his wealth, is also repellant due to the disparity in their ages—and an exploration of those qualities that celebrate and problematize age-disparate marriage allow for an analysis of those social and cultural
influences that simultaneously guide and offer the opportunity for the expression of choice by the Victorian woman.
“INCONSISTENT” DESIRE: SELF-GOVERNMENT AND AGE-DISPARATE MARRIAGE IN GEORGE ELIOT’S MIDDLEMARCH

In the first chapter of Middlemarch, there is a curious and important moment that evocatively reveals much about Dorothea’s relationship to her own desires. As she and her sister, Celia, sort through their mother’s jewels, Dorothea will not accept any of her mother’s finery, until an emerald bracelet and ring is highlighted by a break in the clouds. Previously guided by her (in Celia’s words) “Puritanic superiority,” she came “under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam” of the jewels themselves. Instead of rejecting them, as her sister expects, Dorothea puts them on, and “all the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colors by merging them in her mystic religious joy.” She rejects her sister’s offer of the “pretty and quiet” agates, and decides she will keep the ring and bracelet, though “Celia thought that her sister was going to renounce the ornaments, as in consistency she ought to do.” Instead, Dorothea “took up her pencil without removing the jewels, and still looking at them. She thought of often having them by her, to feed her eye at these little fountains of pure color,” her “inward fire” flashing in response to these gleaming bits of “pure color.” The scene ends with Dorothea “questioning the purity of her own feeling and speech” and Celia observing that her sister’s adherence to her own principles and opinions are sometimes “inconsistent.” It is this inconsistency and what it says about Dorothea that interests me. The tension between her response to the jewels, her struggle to be at peace with her desire for them, and her sister’s resentment of Dorothea’s lack of consistency all speaks of a lack of
resolution that belies her “Puritanic” tendencies (Eliot 38-40). Though these jewels never reappear within the novel, what they say about Dorothea resonates throughout *Middlemarch*, particularly within the context of her unhappy marriage to the much older Casaubon.

Early in her novel *Middlemarch*, George Eliot expresses its fictional community’s discomfort with the pairing of an older man and a young woman with an almost Gothic intensity: Dorothea and Casaubon’s impending nuptials are objected to with a sense of disgust that her “blooming full-pulsed youth” would be wedded to a seemingly decrepit figure of a man with “one foot in the grave,” who is “no better than a mummy” (239, 74). Luckily for Casaubon, however, this disdainful attitude does not represent the full spectrum of response within Middlemarch, as on the other hand, it is also admitted (in the words of Mrs. Cadwallader) that he “has money enough; I must do him that justice,” making Dorothea’s a good, though unlikely, match (71). As these examples illustrate, the pairing of a couple marked by disparity in age is one that can been seen as both compelling and repellent, with practical considerations (such as the wealth, status, and stability an older man can offer) coming up against the deeply felt discomfort that such a difference in age elicits. The source of this tension can be traced to a variety of societal factors that simultaneously celebrate and condemn, and in effect, problematize such marriages, and as the example of *Middlemarch* illustrates, the culture of nineteenth-century England offers no exception. However, it is not enough to say that Dorothea and Casaubon’s marriage is problematic because of age-disparity – rather, it is necessary to examine the reasons why the marriage was seen as simultaneously attractive and problematic. An exploration of these qualities allows for an analysis of those social and
cultural influences—important for what they say about the experience of marriage and its possibilities as a means for self-expression—that simultaneously guide and offer the opportunity for the expression of choice by the Victorian woman.

Robert Polhemus’s *Lot’s Daughters* and *The Spectacles of Intimacy* by Karen Chase and Michael Levenson explore the underlying social factors and attitudes regarding age-disparate marriage, offering a means to investigate that which affirms and troubles pairings of older men and younger women as expressed within Eliot’s novel. In turn, I revise the models of Polhemus and Chase and Levenson by examining how this problematization of age-disparate marriage can be rooted within the Victorian ideals of liberalism and domestic femininity. While providing insights into how the disquiet regarding “inconsistent” expression of desire and older male-younger female pairings fits into the larger social context of nineteenth-century England, these seemingly incongruent value systems connect through their overlapping interest in self-government – autonomy of the self and restraint of the self, simultaneous power and suppression. And though Dorothea is seen as being capable of self-restraint, what she also imagines is a life of expression—whether within her community through good works, intellectualism, or choosing a mate—putting her at odds with the values of self-government. Further, as the scene with the emeralds reveals, Dorothea cannot fully “renounce” (and barely acknowledges) her “inward fire,” and instead leaves such troubling impulses potentially unmastered. Though her decisions are often considered objectionable for a woman of her class and status, it is the motivations behind her choice to marry her much older first husband (as well as the reality of their married life) that highlights just how problematic both her relationship to her own desires and her attempt to express them through an age-
disparate pairing can be. Dorothea, then, does not merely trouble the standards of Middlemarch, but those of Eliot’s day: for, while liberalism celebrates choice and personal liberty, and domestic femininity dictates female choice as being determined by strict convention, they both privilege the restraint of the self, speaking to the prevalence and impact of this value and highlighting just how disturbing her “inconsistent” desire truly is.

That Dorothea and Casaubon’s age-disparate marriage has been seen as problematic has been previously explored: criticism of Dorothea and her first marriage has focused on a number of areas, including those qualities that make Casaubon unsuitable for Dorothea. As Suzanne Graver terms it, her much older husband is both “paternal and despotic,” as well as an “oppressor” (61), while Selma Brody calls Casaubon “a middle-aged benedict full of learning but of cold temperament” (63). However, as Bernard J. Paris vividly clarifies, “what makes the marriage to Casaubon so disgusting to other people—the age difference and his lack of ‘red-blooded manhood’ (Ch. 8)—is part of his appeal to Dorothea. Since she has an idealized image of herself as an ascetic who scorns worldly pleasures” life with Casaubon appears to be a perfect match (Paris 243). That the choice is generally seen as “disgusting” (despite its apparent appeal for Dorothea) cannot be denied, in part because of its impact. As Barbara Hardy explains, “Dorothea is tragically married to Casaubon…What happens to her, in her young hope and brilliance, is horrible, terrible, and miserable.” This tragic quality is enhanced by her “young, attractive, blooming, and physically active” qualities, suggesting she possesses a vigour that is unseemly to match up with a man of Casaubon’s
age and condition (*The Miserable* 66-67). To continue, women like Dorothea, Hardy explains:

are sympathetic, well-born, intelligent, creative human beings, under-educated, untrained, taught a few superficial accomplishments and manners, dressed and cultivated, with marriage in mind, a marriage to someone of their own or a better class, a marriage with money. They are all brought up in a culture where marriage is what is expected of them and is all that is expected of them. The horror and misery of such a system is demonstrated in marriages with men who are old enough to be their fathers, who have little in common with them, and who in various ways fail in sexuality and love. Casaubon is over forty-five, Dorothea nineteen. (*The Miserable* 70)

The “culture” and “system” of nineteenth-century Britain that limits the choice and expression of its “intelligent, creative” young women within marriage is fully exposed and “demonstrated” within a marriage such as the one presented in *Middlemarch*.

In fact, this was an explicit concern for Eliot. The second to last paragraph of the first edition (1871-1872) of *Middlemarch* included the following text (deleted by the 1874 edition): “Among the many remarks passed on her mistakes, it was never said in the neighbourhood of Middlemarch that such mistakes could not have happened if the society in which she was born had not smiled on propositions of marriage from a sickly man to a girl less than half his age” (*The Novels* 52). Here Eliot, as Hardy does, places blame squarely upon “society” for encouraging such an unequal and unkind pairing (though it is also revealing that society does not recognize its complicity in “such mistakes”). This subtext to marriage is one that can be seen in her novel, with the community’s disapproval of Dorothea and Casaubon’s marriage (due to their disparity in age, amongst other factors) balanced by his “handsome property” and “good” income, elevating their marriage from shocking to acceptably good and affirming its suitability despite the issue of age (60, 62). As June Skye Szrotyn confirms, “vociferous as are
Dorothea’s friends in objecting to her marriage, they do not fundamentally oppose the match. For it satisfies their most deeply rooted concerns that she marry money and social position” (24). This finger-pointing is echoed by Bege K. Bowers: Dorothea “is made to feel useless by a society that offers few outlets for a woman’s creative energy” leaving her with few viable options outside of marriage, “just as Casaubon himself is a victim of the socially ‘sanctioned’ belief that a ‘man of a good position’ must take as a wife ‘a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding’ (272; ch. 29)” (111). As Eliot and Bowers indicate, both halves of the couple are impacted by their socially sanctioned but problematic pairing. How this impact plays out for Dorothea within the novel, as well as those factors that sanction such a pairing will be explored.

The desire to create and live a life of personal meaning is a common theme in *Middlemarch*. A multitude of characters attempt to express themselves through vocation or social maneuvering as a means of manifesting the life they imagine they are meant to live; the former impulse shown in the example of Lydgate, who intends to create sweeping change in medicine, while the latter is seen in the example of Rosamond Vincy, who intends to live the life of a lady by marrying well. Dorothea Brooke, however, follows neither example: her attempts to create a life of personal meaning challenge expectations of appropriate choice while also transcending both vocational and social concerns. It is not an accident that two of the preceding examples—Rosamond and Dorothea—involves marriage. For women of the Victorian era, marriage offered an opportunity to assert themselves, with varying degrees of possibility. For upper-class
women like Dorothea, though they are socially and economically privileged their
existence is also prescribed by the strictures of status, making the selection of a husband
one of the few areas where it is possible they can exercise some degree of will. Dorothea
does so, not once but twice within Eliot’s novel, and in differing ways her marriage to
Casaubon and then Ladislaw can both be seen as expressions of her aspiration to make
life-determining choices expressive of her desires despite meeting with the disapproval of
her family and community. Motivated by an effort to strive against the “dreary
uselessness of a ‘gentlewoman’s oppressive liberty’” (Nicholes 115), Dorothea attempts
to circumvent expectations of conventionality and instead achieve a life that resonates
with personal meaning.

The expected path for “a Christian young lady of fortune”—charity, embroidery
and other such feminine niceties, conventional marriage, as Eliot suggests—is not for
Dorothea. The “amiable and handsome” Sir James is, in the words of Mr. Brooke “just
the sort of man” he imagines “a woman would like” —as well as desirable as a family
alliance that would unite their adjoining properties—but neither is important to his niece
(36, 60). Instead, as the narrator explains, “the union which attracted her was one that
would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the
freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path”
(46). In “girlish subjection” to “her own ignorance,” Dorothea instead wishes to submit
herself in “spiritual communion” to the calling of an older man whose qualities of
intellect and spirituality will allow her association with “the higher inward life” (46). In
Casaubon, Dorothea imagines she has found such a “guide”: “There would be nothing
trivial about our lives. Every-day things with us would mean the greatest things…I
should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here--now--in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now” (51). Prior to her marriage to Casaubon, Dorothea smarts under the confines of “the shallows” of the “ladies’ school literature” and “toy-box history of the world” education she received and instead wishes to gain the knowledge and experience necessary to accomplish truly great things that will make an impact on her community (47, 94). Though Dorothea is sure that her cottages can do some good (if she can just get them built), she does not feel that she possesses the intellectual resources to create a greater, grander impact.

It is also here that another truth of Dorothea’s aspirations emerge: they depend on her association with another, one who she believes is endowed with the wisdom needed to elevate her to the heights necessary to accomplish what she intends. There are reasons for this limitation in vision, however. As Bernard J. Paris suggests, “Dorothea’s dream of glory chiefly takes the form of fantasies about marrying a great man…Because she is a woman, she cannot dream of doing special deeds herself but must live vicariously through a male…Casaubon seems to be exactly the man for whom she is looking” (243). Though Dorothea does not intend to “live vicariously” through Casaubon but rather to be his active and humble assistant in completing his great life’s work (“what a work to be in any ways present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder,” she thinks, page 42), the suggestion is merited. Dorothea indeed uses marriage as her vehicle for the “grand life” she cannot achieve herself, by attempting to make “Casaubon’s scholarly vocation her own” through tireless assistance (Nazar 306). The barriers towards female intellectual or
social achievement present in nineteenth-century Britain are not impassible (as Eliot herself illustrates) but they are far-reaching. This concern with the limitations of the female lot is, in fact, a common theme in George Eliot’s writing. As Calder explains in *Women and Marriage in Victorian Fiction*, Eliot’s

profoundest interests lay with women who had hopes and aspirations beyond the conventional, women who wanted to achieve things, however vague, who were impatient of the aims usually attributed to them…who are nevertheless symbolic of the deeper stirrings and frustrations of women’s life in general. Her heroines…[including] Dorothea Brooke…are all women who want more than conventional attitudes would be ready to grant them. But they are not rebels, let alone revolutionaries…It is as if George Eliot wished to anchor her heroines in ‘normal’ society…for the purposes of demonstrating that, if they were unusual in terms of conventional assumptions about what women ought to do with themselves, they were not unusual in terms of humanity, history and the needs and wants of women in general. (126)

This positioning of Dorothea as unusual in the scope of her “hopes and aspirations” but “not unusual in terms of humanity” common to the women of her time is one that reveals much about the potential for frustration and disconnect present in the Victorian female experience. In the case of Dorothea, her desire for “more than conventional attitudes would be ready to grant” clearly includes choice in marriage (no matter the age of her husband), as well as an interest in a life of influence beyond the domestic sphere that such a marriage would enable. As Robert Polhemus explains: “the older man of power is present and part of the revelation of the young woman’s dreams,” meaning, in this fictional example, that Dorothea’s choice of the older Casaubon potentially offers a means to circumvent the social limitations under which she smarts (171). Unlikely to realize greatness solely through their own efforts due to the social restrictions of the day, a relationship such as the one shared by Dorothea and Casaubon potentially offers a
young woman access to that same “power” through association, allowing for “the liberation of female aspirations” (Polhemus 4).

Dorothea’s aspirations for a life that transcends the “light” and “trivial” clearly illustrate that her marital ambitions deviate from romantic, pragmatic, or mercenary, as the case may be, norms. They also deviate from that which others imagine of a woman of her class and status. The qualities “prefigured” for her are to be shaped through education and training, the primary purpose of which is to groom her “for courtship and marriage” (Hall 63). In the words of Catherine Hall: “Music, drawing, painting, French, fancy work, gossip and fashion were the stuff of a Victorian girl’s life – all designed to prepare her to catch a man…[and] to prepare them in the best possible way for their relative sphere” (64, 89). This “preparation,” and the person it is attempting to shape her into, is one that Dorothea actively resists. This can be seen early in the novel, when Sir James states that “every lady ought to be a perfect horsewoman, that she may accompany her husband,” and Dorothea’s tart reply—“You see how widely we differ, Sir James. I have made up my mind that I ought not to be a perfect horsewoman, and so I should never correspond to your pattern of a lady”—“shows her refusal to accept conventional expectations of her behavior (45-46). This resistance is further reinforced in Eliot’s novel, when Mr. Brooke suggests that Dorothea should strive to play nicely on the piano in order to make her intended’s evenings pleasant, and receives the rejoinder that “Mr. Casaubon is not fond of the piano, and I am very glad he is not,” said Dorothea, whose slight regard for domestic music and feminine fine art must be forgiven her, considering the small tinkling and smearing in which they chiefly consisted at that dark period. She smiled and looked up at her betrothed with grateful eyes” (79). In both cases, it is
Casaubon who offers Dorothea what appears to be a protective and fatherly escape from these expectations of the performance expected for a woman of her “relative sphere,” shedding further light on his attractiveness for her.

Dorothea’s desire for “power” through association with the much older Casaubon is confirmed in another expression of desire, namely that of her aspirations for a greater intellect with which to enable a “grand life.” Unfortunately for Dorothea, female education was seen as presenting dangers for many Victorians, and was as potentially problematic as the issue of sexual desire. Mr. Brooke expresses this concern, when he hears that Dorothea is learning Greek: “Well, but now, Casaubon, such deep studies, classics, mathematics, that kind of thing, are too taxing for a woman--too taxing, you know.” When Casaubon replies “Dorothea is learning to read the characters simply…she had the very considerate thought of saving my eyes,” Mr. Brooke responds: “Ah, well, without understanding, you know--that may not be so bad. But there is a lightness about the feminine mind--a touch and go--music, the fine arts, that kind of thing--they should study those up to a certain point, women should; but in a light way, you know” (78-79). This “lightness” requires preservation for a reason. As “Mrs Ellis, in her chapter on the training of girls,” states: “a woman, I would humbly suggest, has no business to be so far absorbed in any purely intellectual pursuit, as not to know when water is boiling over on the fire” (Hall 64). The disdain that Mrs. Ellis holds for a woman who does not know her domestic business, so to speak, is one that can be linked to the common fear of that time that education would over-intellectualize women and make them unsuited for their primary purpose of being “faithfully employed in discharging the various duties of a wife and daughter, a mother and friend.” This misdirected focus would instead lead to a
“culpable neglect of the most important obligations” as women are instead “daily absorbed by philosophic and literary speculations” (Armstrong 68). The unease that a woman is incapable of incorporating intellectual pursuits with domestic concerns perhaps also implies that while these concerns are ostensibly of paramount importance, they are not as alluring as “philosophic and literary speculations,” which is certainly true for Eliot’s heroine. Hina Nazar’s observation that Dorothea “identifies marriage as the venue for a particular kind of scholarship, an initiation into the mysteries of the Hebrew alphabet rather than the mysteries of conjugal pleasure,” suggests that her considerations on selecting her older first husband are purely intellectual, making them seem all the more problematic and unnatural by the standards of the day (306).

The desire to create a life of personal meaning, one Dorothea manifests throughout Middlemarch, is one that finds resonance in many of the ideals and philosophies of the Victorian era; specifically, this celebration of “personal freedom” and “liberty of the individual” can be located within nineteenth-century British liberal thought and writing (Hobhouse 53, 91). Though much of this writing is concerned with political and economic expressions of those ideals, of interest for this discussion are those moments that explore the rights of freedom and choice for the individual, as can be found in the writings of Smith, Malthus, and Arnold, and more explicitly within that of L.T. Hobhouse and John Stuart Mill. As the latter suggested, “the principle [of human liberty] requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow: without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong” (On 54-55). The invocation to have the
freedom to do “as we like” can be seen as an expression of a key liberal value that was concerned with the influence of not only “the tyranny of political rulers,” but more importantly, “social tyranny” (Mill On 46). In the context of Eliot’s novel, though her community may see Dorothea’s choice of Casaubon as “foolish, perverse, or wrong” it is still hers to make. Framed as a “struggle between Liberty and Authority” (Mill On 43), this celebration of self-expression in the face of resistance (the nature of which as it impacts Dorothea will be explored in later pages) is expressed in works such as On Liberty and Liberalism.

The self-expression that seems most powerful (and daring) is not necessarily what is easily imagined: spending and wearing and eating and saying what we like, for example. Rather, it is that which drives one in “framing the plan of our life to suit our own character,” as Mill states in On Liberty. The right to create a life that suits our tastes (within the confines of safety for others, as the repeated caveat qualifies) is one that suggests both the far-reaching authority of personal liberty but also the right of the individual to fashion lives of difference. In his chapter titled “Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being,” Mill explains “to give any fair play to the nature of each, it is essential that different persons should be allowed to lead different lives” (109). A life cannot be our own if it is meant to resemble all others in a difference of sameness. Instead, the liberal embrace of individuality provides the room for a person to become who they hope and intend to be: their “true self.” The desire to frame the plan of her life to suit her own character, to paraphrase Mill, is one that drives Dorothea Brooke. As Jenni Calder explains, “she wants an identity other than that prefigured for her,” one that goes beyond the responsibilities and frivolities of an upper-class woman (149).
Disinclined to follow the conventions of her class and gender that were “prefigured for
her,” she is instead driven towards participation in something far more significant and
epic. Eliot expresses this interest early in the novel as Dorothea restlessly searches for her
purpose: “For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in
her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective.
What could she do, what ought she to do?” (51). Dorothea’s desire to make her “life
greatly effective” draws her away from the path of conventional domestic femininity and
into what she believes (incorrectly, as it turns out) will be far more exalted intellectual
and spiritual reaches via her marriage to her older husband.

If the “nineteenth century might be called the age of Liberalism,” in the words of
Hobhouse, it was also an age during which the manifestation of opportunity was also
influenced by status, class, gender, race, and a myriad of other factors (91). The
predominance of ideals supporting the “liberty of the individual” are often checked from
full expression by social influences that also determine what is “prefigured” for that
“individual” (Hobhouse 91). However, despite a myriad of competing values to the
otherwise, liberal thinking indeed incorporates women like Dorothea into the ranks of
those allowed to choose. When writing of the need for “Domestic Liberty,” Hobhouse
explains that “the movement of liberation” will also consist “in rendering the wife a fully
responsible individual, capable of holding property, suing and being sued, conducting
business on her own account, and enjoying full personal protection against her husband”
(18). The rights being proposed afford women economic and social empowerment and
protection both within and without the domestic sphere. This is in part due to pragmatic
concerns, as the isolation of women within that sphere deprives society of their intellect
and the progress that they may enable, as Hobhouse suggests in *Liberalism*. However, it also represents an equal application of that “central idea of English life and politics…the assertion of personal liberty” (Arnold 83). If a woman is to be a “fully responsible individual” empowered to act in a “self-directing” manner, then expression of this freedom of choice would include those rights listed above, as well as choice in marriage (Hobhouse 53). Though *Middlemarch* does not explicitly propose the advances outlined years later in *Liberalism*, it does make clear that Dorothea has little interest doing anything but what she likes, to paraphrase Mill, no matter how at odds that puts her with the expectations of custom (as her rejoinder that she intends to “never correspond” to the limitations dictated by the “pattern of a lady” that has been provided her illustrates, page 46).

Mill would further explore the lot of nineteenth-century women in his later publication, *The Subjection of Women*. Within that text, he objects to the perspectives that “the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother,” and that “all that has been done in the modern world to relax the chain on the minds of women, has been a mistake. They never should have been allowed to receive a literary education. Women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic servant” (26, 28). Rather than being educated in a manner that will allow their natural talents beyond the domestic sphere to be developed and expressed for the betterment of society (the very desire that Dorothea possesses), instead “women are schooled into suppressing them in their most natural and most healthy direction” (98). As Mill states, this “relic” of “domestic oppression” makes
“marriage the only actual bondage known to our law” as “the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal” (16, 34, 79, 47). As I have explored, these are sentiments expressed both within Eliot’s novel and in the writing of the day, giving credence to the validity and applicability of Mill’s bluntly stated concerns. In fact, this connection is one that has previously been made: as Suzanne Graver affirms, both *The Subjection of Women* and *Middlemarch* “share a common subject matter: the lot of women and relations between men and women in marriage” (55). There are, as she explains, “remarkable correspondences between [Eliot’s] depiction of marriage relations and Mill’s criticism of the practices governing the institution of marriage in *The Subjection*….The critique of that novel of the beliefs, laws, and customs regulating matrimonial arrangements is in its own way as powerful as Mill’s” (55-56). It is clear, then, that liberalism and its celebration of choice is meant by Eliot to include women. What must be explored then are those other aspects of liberalism, as well as those of domestic femininity that provide a counter-balance of influence against its full expression in Victorian society.

As Dorothea’s choice in Casaubon brands her as being motivated by interests other than romance—which is perhaps hoped of her by her fictional community and the reader since the idea of their marriage is apparently so repellent—and she has demonstrated that her interests are not class- or gender-appropriate, she becomes a particularly problematic and evocative example of the perils of expressing one’s desires inappropriately. Though liberalism embraces Dorothea’s right to express herself though choice, this freedom is paired with an emphasis on exercising it mindfully. This valuing of self-restraint is one that is also expressed in the ideas and writing of nineteenth-century Britain. In *On
Liberty, Mill explores the idea that extreme self-control and extreme passion are two sides of the same coin: “The same strong susceptibilities which make the personal impulses vivid and powerful, are also the source from whence are generated the most passionate love of virtue, and the sternest self-control” (106). Mill’s language seems to suggest that a person of deep passion is also capable of “the sternest self-control,” that the two extremes spring from the same “source,” offering the promise that self-expression does not have to equal unmanageable behavior. However, it also leaves open the unsettling possibility that a firmly self-controlled person is hiding a heretofore-unimagined depth of unexpressed passion, suggesting that it could only be a matter of time before they swing to the other end of the behavioral spectrum. Though Dorothea has successfully quashed her passions by choosing to “repress her physical joy, for example, in horseback riding” (Greene “G. Eliot’s” 27), her response to her mother’s emeralds refutes the completeness of that repression. Additionally, further putting into doubt her ability to practice “the sternest self-control,” Dorothea also resists the demands and strictures of her class and gender in order to first express and develop herself intellectually through an age-disparate marriage, and later through marriage for love despite the condemnation of her community.

Lest we shirk from fully considering the impact of willfully passionate behavior, as T.R. Malthus warns in An Essay on the Principle of Population, “an implicit obedience to the impulses of our natural passions would lead us into the wildest and most fatal extravagancies” (209). He acknowledges that while we cannot extinguish our “natural passions,” in order to secure “the greatest sum of human happiness” we must look to “regulation” (213). In Malthus’s discussions of the responsibilities of the individual to
bring about a more perfect society (in this case, one not burdened with the misery of overpopulation), it is significant how much pressure falls upon the individual: “It is in the power of each individual to avoid all the evil consequences to himself and society resulting from the principle of population” (224). This regulation of sexual appetite is trying, he admits, but should not be impossible, as man’s “considerations of his own interest and happiness will dictate to him the strong obligation to moral restraint. However powerful may be the impulses of passion, they are generally to some degree modified by reason” (227). I rather enjoy the qualifying “generally to some degree” Malthus uses, as it acknowledges he’s on slippery territory in attempting to use reason as a shield against “the impulses of passion.” However, ultimately his message remains constant: the poor need to be “undeceived with respect to the principal cause of their past poverty, and taught to know that their future happiness or misery must depend chiefly upon themselves” (242). According to Malthus, it is incumbent upon each of us to practice “moral restraint” in order to ensure our “own interest and happiness.” While Dorothea is clearly not a poor mother with a brood of starving children, the message found here is still worth considering. The only factor that protects one from the misery of poorly conceived and passionately driven judgment is reason and the exercise of moral restraint: Mathus does not pretend that such passions are not “natural” but insists we must seek to regulate them. Unfortunately, as we see over the course of Middlemarch, Eliot’s heroine practices an imperfect application of socially necessary self-regulation, making hers a “life…not ideally beautiful” but one rich with experience – with her unhappiness in marriage to Casaubon a reflection of her inability to both choose wisely for herself and find a means to express her passions within the confines of that marriage (640).
Dorothea’s problematic regulation and exercise of choice becomes particularly troubling when we consider its context. As Mary Poovey outlines in *Making a Social Body*, tying this celebration of self-control to larger social concerns of the Victorian era, the liberal ideals of that time celebrated “individual happiness” while also demanding participation in the diligent support of an orderly and productive society (24). As Poovey explains, a liberal “society was ‘free’ in the sense that government interfered with the economic not at all and ostensibly with the social as little as possible. It was ‘free,’ in other words, in the sense that its members constituted individualized instances of a single self-regulating subject, whose life was subdivided among the domains that claimed autonomy but appeared to be alike” (24). Just as Malthus encourages the restraint of “natural passions” in order to enjoy both the “happiness” promised by a well-regulated life and the advantages of that restraint on the overall society, the ideas expressed by Poovey privilege the needs of the society over that of the ostensibly “free” individual, demanding regulation in order to preserve the smooth running machine of Victorian society. That social body is comprised of individuals who take responsibility for regulation upon themselves, rather than surrendering that responsibility to a regulating agent or institution. This “self-government” was a crucial aspect, and again (as with Malthus) we see the individual as responsible for the smooth and upward progress of liberal society. What Poovey also explains is that this call for “self-government” (or, to put it another way, “restraint”) can be seen as natural (26). According to Adam Smith (via Poovey), “the human capacity for self-government both derived from and underwrote the sociality of human nature” (33). Not only is self-governing behavior prudent then, but also natural, implying that to do otherwise is somehow perverse or
abnormal, highlighting how problematic (and dangerous, really) a lack of self-government was seen to be.

The dangers regarding self-government are magnified when one considers the standards of the day concerning domestic femininity. If we accept marriage as an avenue for female choice, it is also a means to gain or cement status, class, and financial stability, making it one fraught with social and economic importance. In addition to the importance ascribed to savvy selection in marriage, the nature of a woman’s responsibilities within the home was also important within Victorian society. According to Nancy Armstrong, to the domestic woman “went authority over the household, leisure time, courtship procedures, and kinship relations” – precisely the limit in scope that Mill bemoaned (3). According to these attitudes “marriage is the only real site for the exercise of female agency.” However, as becomes clear, the nature of this “agency” is one in which Dorothea cannot imagine finding fulfillment (Nazar 306). Elizabeth Langland has pointed out that in the example of Dorothea, Eliot shows women’s lives within the domestic realm as being limited and limiting. In contrast, many writers of the nineteenth century offered portrayals of women that challenged “the historical portrait of Victorian women as the passive, dependent, and idle creatures of prevailing ideology” (Langland 11). Eliot conveys this portrait of domestic femininity in part by illustrating little in the way of Dorothea’s domestic management besides a mention or two of having “some memoranda to write for the housekeeper” (499). In addition, Dorothea regularly expresses “disregard for the conventionally feminine concerns” of domestic niceties and responsibilities that are part and parcel with her upper-class domestic sphere, and instead prefers to direct her energies towards the intellectual realm seemingly promised by association with a scholar.
like Casaubon (Marotta 407). While it is true we see little mention of Dorothea’s exercise of household authority, and that this absence perhaps “belittles the life of a lady and evacuates it of significance” (Langland 193), what this also indicates is that during the period of her life that leads up to and includes her first marriage, Dorothea imagines fulfillment outside that realm. In addition, Eliot’s agenda in writing Middlemarch may well have been to explore the very nature of the frustrations that dogged many of the women of her time.  

While Dorothea’s decision to marry Casaubon has been shown to be problematic as it exposes her desires and ambitions as socially inappropriate and potentially dangerous, that is not the end of the story. Part of what makes age-disparate pairings so often problematic for Victorians is that it appears to trouble values that celebrate marriage as an expression of deeply felt attachment. As Sybil Wolfram explains, “the proper marriage in England was and is a ‘love match,’” one motivated by true and reciprocal feelings between husband and wife (70). As the attitudes of the time dictated, in addition to the usual considerations of compatibility that would ensure such a “match,” with respect to the issue of age, “ideally, a husband and wife are more or less of an age, with the husband perhaps a little older” (Wolfram 70). What this preference meant for age-disparate pairings is that “the marriage of a much older man with a much younger woman was readily tolerated, although most usually thought of as unlikely to be a love match on the woman’s side” (Wolfram 70). The reasons for this tolerance as expressed within Middlemarch has been and will be explored at a later point in this analysis, but what is of immediate interest is that the wary eye regarding such a marriage is directed towards the female half of this pairing, implying that there is an unnatural or troubling aspect
underlying her acceptance. This sentiment is echoed within Eliot’s novel when Ladislaw comes to perceive that through her role as his wife, Dorothea had intended to assist Casaubon in his life’s work, giving him “a new light, but still a mysterious light” in understanding what called her to marry his cousin. Though he had earlier assumed she must be somehow “disagreeable” to have consented to become Mrs. Casaubon, he comes to realize, “she must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage” (191). As is revealed over the course of the novel, the “original romance” that Dorothea makes leading up to her first marriage is unable to refute the expectation that a matrimony marked by disparity in age is indeed not a love match.

As Chase and Levenson term it, “the problem of age” is one that is easily discovered in age-disparate pairings. “What keeps this seductive arrangement unsettled is the fear that the wife/daughter cannot, and perhaps should not, give herself up” (96). The language they use is revealing: that though it is “unsettling” (as has and will be explored), a marriage of this sort is “seductive,” and expressive of a compelling “dream of female devotion” that such a pairing—between an older man and a spouse both wife and daughter—seems to promise (96). It is just such a “dream” that inspires the scholarly Casaubon, who has heretofore devoted himself to his expansive life’s work, The Key to All Mythologies, to ask a woman almost thirty years his junior, one in “the early bloom of youth,” to marry him (Eliot 63). Though he had previously not been inclined to take on the distractions and demands of marriage, in meeting Dorothea he realized that he now wanted “cheerful companionship” with a woman whose youth and “devotedness” made her well “adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours” (Eliot 49, 62-63). According to Casaubon’s “most agreeable previsions of marriage,”
Dorothea would attentively assist him in his intellectual pursuits (those “graver labours”) and provide “the solace of female tendance for his declining years” through her “ardent submissive affection” (Eliot 77-78). It is apparent from the language used by both Casaubon and the narrator that the “charm” and allure of Dorothea’s beauty and youthful but submissive enthusiasm make her a compelling match, rather than any real understanding of the type of companion who would be best suited to a man seen by most as a dusty, old scholar; it is however, a role that Dorothea eagerly and earnestly anticipates. As is revealed over the course of the novel, however, her desire for this role is problematic not only for readers and Dorothea’s fictional community but for Eliot herself, for she chooses to make this marriage not an avenue for satisfaction and happiness but rather something far grimmer and dispiriting.

The previously explored ideals of the liberation of female choice and aspirations are part of what makes age-disparate marriages so problematic. The language highlighted at the start of this paper conveys the horror that a vibrantly attractive (and, as her “blooming full-pulsed” qualities suggest, sexual) young woman like Dorothea will be cozying up to the crumbling bones of Casaubon in their marital bed. Never mind that she willingly and eagerly accepted his offer in marriage – few within the novel can resist the idea that Dorothea should be rescued from her fate as Mrs. Casaubon. Will Ladislaw, not a disinterested observer to be sure, expresses this sentiment nicely: “Casaubon had done a wrong to Dorothea in marrying her. 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’” (Eliot 302). The language Casaubon himself uses to describe his life confirms the community’s (and
reader’s) anxiety in an evocatively dreadful manner: “I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be, in spite of ruin and confusing changes” (Eliot 42). Casaubon appears to be so sexually desiccated by his continual proximity “with the dead” that his mind is not filled with appropriately conjugal interests but the “ghosts” of the ancient cultures he studies. In this horror (expertly conveyed by the imagery of “grey crunching bones” and “virgin sacrifices”) one can detect the tension and conflict that underlies a pairing marked by difference in age, and Chase and Levenson offer the means to discover and tease out the nature of the fears that drive that discomfort. Their discussion of Dickens explores the tension that is located within the “difference in age between young wife and old(er) husband” (96). The older husband in their example “sees what the reader is taught to fear: that youth will turn back to youth and the stable settlement of home will be devastated by the return of suppressed desires,” echoing Casaubon’s own jealousy of the friendship between Dorothea and Ladislaw (97). By tying the anxiety regarding age-disparate pairings to fears of inappropriate expression of female desire and agency, Chase and Levenson reveal the fear that the young wife will not be able to govern her unmet desires—desires that cannot be fully expressed within such a pairing—and be tempted to be led astray; that true self-restraint is not truly possible within such a context.

As Robert Polhemus explains, the “patriarchal culture” of nineteenth-century Britain supports “adult male projections,” in both “real and fictional” guises (an example of the latter being Casaubon’s), of the suitability of nubile young wives as companions to older men (45, 7, 5). The social sanction of marriage between young women and older
men—and the word sanction is useful here as it suggests both authorization and restriction, highlighting the inherently conflicted and contradictory attitude towards age-disparate pairings—are rooted in what Polhemus calls the “Lot complex,” which is a "dynamic configuration of wishes, sexual fantasies, fears, and symbolic imagery that has worked to form generational relationships and structure personality, gender identity, religious faith, and social organization” (4). His inclusion of “wishes” and “sexual fantasies” in the forming of “generational relationships” can be linked to the seductive aspect that Chase and Levenson identified as an element of pairings of this sort. What is “unsettling” (to revisit their terminology) is that the sexual fantasies include those of a “father figure” directed or projected upon his wife/daughter, making them more or less incestuous in association (Greene “Another” 32). That the expression of sexuality within such a relationship is so unsettling and problematic as to be seen as vaguely incestuous speaks to the prevailing discomfort such pairings engender. It also reinforces the older husband’s perceived incapability of meeting his young wife’s desires – ostensibly leaving her open to temptation to stray from the confines of their marriage bed. “This is the dread that lives within the fantasy, the fear that the pattern of busy young wife and placid older husband will come to grief on the shoals of the wife’s desire,” leaving the domestic “charms” the older man had anticipated in choosing his spouse smashed amidst the ruins of their marriage (Chase and Levenson 96-97).

The implications of this male fantasy for younger women are multiple. As Robert Polhemus explains in his introduction, the Lot complex also includes “the power of projection” and “the drive for female agency” (9-10). The former is connected to not only male desire for younger women but the “projection and displacement of sexual desire by
mature, aging father figures onto young women,” in effect making these young women complicit in their own desirability (10). This is not to suggest, however, that fantasy regarding younger women is never matched by a reciprocal interest in older men by younger women. As Polhemus qualifies, though “in the Lot complex, the desires of the father are projected upon the daughters, it doesn’t follow that the daughter’s desire for the father…is inauthentic” (10). This suggestion that desire can be reciprocal in age-disparate relationships positions the younger woman not as victim but as an active participant – an idea at odds with Dorothea as a “virgin sacrifice,” indicating the degree to which this positioning of female desire for her father-figure husband as “authentic” is discomfiting. This model of choice is supported by the latter feature of the Lot complex, that of its role in the development of “female agency.” This is achieved, to use the example of Lot and his daughters, through just such a “displacement”: “by projecting upon the daughters the moral onus for incest, the Scripture ironically allows them to become conspiratorial, socially responsible agents. Women move from sacrificial objects to reasoning subjects” (10-11). Through their participation in such a seemingly unequal partnership, one imbued with a potentially erotic fixation by the older man, women can in fact be transformed into “reasoning subjects.” This desire for her own development into a “reasoning subject” is just such an impulse that drives Dorothea in her choice of her first husband.

The idea that marriage can be an avenue for self-expression in the mode imagined by Eliot’s heroine is challenged both by the values of her day and by Eliot within the events of the novel itself. Once Dorothea is married, though “she had married the man of her choice,” the bleak reality of that choice is revealed (179). Sadly, her anticipation of “blending” a “higher initiation in ideas” with the joys of marriage is unmet by the
actuality of her existence with the much older Casaubon (94). Strikingly, Eliot doesn’t even allow Dorothea a honeymoon period of happiness but unveils the reality of her life as Mrs. Casaubon from her first appearance as such within the novel. In fact, the trip to Rome is “fundamentally about Dorothea’s disillusionment, as, with great distress, she begins to realize the fact that her relationship with Casaubon bears little resemblance to her fantasies of an ideal union” (Sodré 204). Instead, her experience of marriage and what it suggests of a woman’s ability to be her fully expressed self within the domestic sphere illustrates that domestic femininity and the value of self-government complicates the idea of marriage as liberal self-expression. Through her purposeful selection of Casaubon, Dorothea believes she is embarking on a life of difference and meaning, but instead discovers something very unlike that which she had envisioned. Upon her return to Lowick the narrator reflects that “marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty: it had not even filled her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness…The ideas and hopes which were living in her mind when she first saw this room nearly three months before were present now only as memories: she judged them as we judge transient and departed things” (239-240). Deprived of the “guidance” she craves, as well as the “tenderness” of married companionship, the ardent and hopeful “maiden dream” visions of her life with Casaubon are reduced to “transient and departed things” and ghostly “memories” (181).

Though part of Dorothea’s disappointment clearly relates to the lack of intimacy in her life with Casaubon, her sense of loss also relates to the incomplete manifestation of the role she had imagined for herself. As has been explored, Dorothea imagines that her
assistance of a great scholar, as she supposes Casaubon to be, will give her the knowledge and understanding necessary to do great things (which, as Robert Polhemus suggests, is a key element in the attraction older men can hold for young women).

Casaubon, unfortunately, is a weak vessel for such desires. Her too-late realization that Casaubon’s life’s work, The Key to All Mythologies, is not worthy of such slavish support is a jarring moment of disconnect between possibility and reality, and one that poignantly reveals the thorough folly of her choice. Though she is surprised and saddened that the “unchecked tenderness” of their marriage has not been expressed as expected, more disquieting is Ladislaw’s shared judgment—who sees Casaubon’s life’s work as a sort of “groping after…mouldy futilities” —that it will “be thrown away…for want of [Casaubon’s] knowing what is being done by the rest of the world,” who have thoroughly disproved the grounds on which his work stands (188-191). The source of Dorothea’s distress appears to be rooted both in the “piteousness” that “the labour of her husband’s life might be void,” but also that his work is inherently flawed and limited in scope, and therefore unlikely to provide her with the intellectual elevation she had been eagerly anticipating (191). As Monica L. Feinberg explains “Dorothea herself marries Mr. Casaubon’s text as much as she marries Mr. Casaubon’s person…It is not surprising that Eliot articulates Dorothea’s disillusionment with her marriage in a lament for her loss of faith in Mr. Casaubon’s text” (19). Her disillusioned realization that his “voluminous notes” are “nothing but dryasdust pedantry” turn her devotion to Casaubon and his text into the very kind of joyless duty she had thought she was avoiding in her unconventional choice of husband (Szirotny 23).
This “loss of faith” in her husband and his work can also be tied to his resistance to her assuming the active role she had imagined for herself. “Even drawing Dorothea into use in his study, according to his own intention before marriage, was an effort which he was always tempted to defer, and but for her pleading insistence it might never have begun. But she had succeeded in making it a matter of course that she should take her place at an early hour in the library and have work either of reading aloud or copying assigned her” (244). That he sees her assistance as “an effort which he was always tempted to defer,” though it had been “his own intention” illustrates that Casaubon, as Eliot’s narrator assures us, is also caught off-guard with the reality of their life together. The unquestioning and adoring secretary he had expected to find in Dorothea— “A wife, a modest young lady, with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful”—has in the light of reality, been replaced by someone much more troublesome (243). As Selma B. Brody explains, Casaubon “turns bitter and unloving, expecting only a passive female adorer, he finds that the wife of his bosom observes and judges him, and has ideas” (64). Casaubon indeed resents Dorothea’s transformation from “the young creature who had worshipped him with perfect trust…into the critical wife,” violating his fantasies of how their age-disparate marriage would be manifested (344). To his surprisingly (to her, anyway) conventional mind, she is not meant to have her own agenda of formidable intellectual development and positive impact on her community. The fundamental incompatibility in vision of their life together spells that there can be no true union for Dorothea nor potential for the degree of mentoring and guidance she craves. She has chosen her husband neither wisely nor too well.
At first, it appears that Dorothea will ably perform the role Casaubon imagines for her. One of Dorothea’s models for the relationship she imagines she will have with Casaubon is that of Milton and his daughters: allowed to “minister” to the needs of a great man and therefore better herself through this service (Eliot 77). She celebrates their part in his great works, little imagining the bleak reality of their experience. As Robert Polhemus explains, Milton forced his daughters “to read by rote material in languages they did not know and could not understand. They did this hour by hour, day by day, to tedium and exhaustion.” Milton’s daughters were not truly participants in the creation of his greatness, as their father treated them like “a superior pair of mynah birds,” called upon to read aloud what they could not understand (109). “What the father wanted was selfless labor and total dedication to his imagination. They had to serve, but were shut out of his life and kept ignorant of the codes that made the diverse human record meaningful to him” (Polhemus 110). Milton’s daughters were expected to live in “ignorant” service to “his imagination” – making it all the more fascinating that while Dorothea first sees them as “naughty” for their resistance to this role, in the end she finds herself refusing to perform just such a dispiriting role with “total dedication” within her marriage to Casaubon. As she discovers, serving an ostensibly “great” man “whose odd habits” she imagined “it would have been glorious piety to endure” is wholly unsatisfying (Eliot 36). “Dorothea had thought that she could have been patient with John Milton, but she had never imagined him behaving in this way; and for a moment Mr. Casaubon seemed to be stupidly undiscerning and odiously unjust” (Eliot 245). The gap between the imagined and real man revealed through the proximity of marriage speaks to the gap between what can be desired and manifested within age-disparate marriage.
In writing of the Brontë family, Robert Polhemus gives the example of the father’s “family catechism” and explains, “each question masks a paternal desire, and each answer offers a means to fulfill it” (151). In a fictional extension of this idea, Dorothea saw her role of assistant to Casaubon as a means to fulfill what she imagines to be his desire for an intellectual helpmate who he can guide and develop (as she hopefully imagines, to use Anna K. Nardo’s language, her “latter-day Milton” requires, page 16). Underlying this is a reciprocal desire, but one that is marred by a lack of agreement. He wants, as has been explored, an agreeable companion, she wants to realize her desire for a “grand life”; more than that however, she wants to be useful to the work she believes is important, to be meaningful by association. As has been explored, however, Dorothea is unable to perform her role as adoring and unquestioning companion to Casaubon, and in the end, he is revealed to be very much her “faux Milton” (Nardo 134). The pain of this unhappy surprise reveals in part the source of her much older husband’s attraction for her. In discussing *Jane Eyre*, Polhemus writes “this daughter’s fantasy, transmuted to visionary art, is a young woman’s marriage to a father-figure who will love her, talk intimately to her, give her a say (in every sense) over both their lives, and make her the center of his being and his destiny” (Polhemus 161-162). We become aware of Dorothea’s desire for a “father-figure,” one that echoes Jane’s, early in the novel, before we are introduced to Casaubon’s, and so in a way he acts to answer her desires. If this is the case, then what is revealed is that Dorothea’s rebellious and potentially problematic desires are operating here, rather than this being a carefully considered and measured decision, one marked by the influence of self-government. Desires, in fact, that are problematic (according to the attitudes of the day) because they are on the one hand
intellectual and on the other, if they truly exist in a sexual capacity, particularly unsettling to contemplate.

Though Dorothea has struggled to assert and create a sense of herself through major individual choices like marriage, as *Middlemarch* unfolds she also struggles to maintain herself within those choices. Not only does Dorothea find her dreams of intellectual development quashed, but her ability to freely speak her mind is also checked. She, of whom Mr. Brooke remarks, “I thought you had more of your own opinion than most girls. I thought you liked your own opinion,” finds herself biting her tongue in her husband’s presence (60). “She was going to say more, but she saw her husband enter and seat himself a little in the background. The difference his presence made to her was not always a happy one: she felt that he often inwardly objected to her speech” (Eliot 276). Here the disparity between the life Dorothea had imagined and her reality is made blatant: the woman who eagerly anticipated she would be able “to live continually in the light a mind she could reverence” comes to find herself in “painful subjection to a husband whose thoughts had been lower than she had believed” (Eliot 63, 399). The unhappy difference that Casaubon makes in the life of Dorothea is only brought to a close by Eliot’s choice to “mercifully widow” Dorothea (Brody 65). Freed from her bonds of pity-bound duty by learning of the “shocking” codicil of his will barring her from keeping her inherited fortune if she marries Ladislaw (the resented young rival for his young wife’s affections), she begins to direct her energies outward and searches for ways to use her now considerable fortune to benefit her community (Eliot 399). With the transformation in perspective the experience of her marriage to Casaubon has afforded her, it is unsurprising that she finds herself “interested now in all
who had slipped below their own intention,” as she herself has clearly done (Eliot 400). This interest also sheds light onto her attraction for Ladislaw, who throughout the novel finds his talents squandered and unfocused, offering Dorothea a worthy career of encouraging and supporting him in his eventual efforts as “an ardent public man” (Eliot 638).

Though she would seem to at last have “the freedom and power to carry out her long-cherished plans,” the hopes Dorothea has in making an impact once she is liberated from her life of duty to Casaubon are unmet by reality (Nicholes 118). Even as a widowed woman of fortune, she finds herself constrained: “Dorothea is prevented from engaging in any kind of sustained useful activity which would give her a sense of purpose and direct accomplishment” (Mitchell 35). The “sense of purpose” she craves is meant to be an antidote to her post-Casaubon life of “motiveless ease—motiveless, if her own energy could not seek out reasons for ardent action” (431). The source of the constraint of her “ardent action” is veiled as brotherly guidance designed to protect her fortune from unnecessary risk, once again preventing her from exercising her liberally supported free expression of interests and concerns. As her sister Celia explains of her husband’s council to Dorothea: “Now, Dodo, do listen to what James says…else you will be getting into a scrape. You always did, and you always will, when you set about doing as you please” (570). As we again see, the liberal espousal of choice does not necessarily in practice apply to a woman in Dorothea’s position, and though, of course, such choice must always be mindful as well as socially responsible, the impulse to do good for her community would seem to qualify. Instead, Celia is relieved that Dorothea now has “James to think for you. He lets you have your plans…A husband would not let you have your plans”
Merely “having” her plans, and someone else to do her thinking for her, is of little comfort, however – what Dorothea desires is to “have something good to do with my money: I should like to make other people’s lives better to them” (590). With “nothing” needed “to be done in the village,” nor the resources “for any great scheme of the sort I like best,” Dorothea has little means to make a positive difference in her community, as she has hoped to accomplish throughout Eliot’s novel (617, 589). Despite her significant resources, she is unable to manifest her desired goal of making the lives of other people “better to them.”

Though Dorothea’s choice to remarry surprises her family and community, particularly as her husband is to be Ladislaw, it is in fact logical as a continuation of Eliot’s exploration of marriage as a possible venue for self-expression and an expression of her belief “that in marriage lay fulfillment” (Calder 128). As Hina Nazar proposes, though

feminist readers of nineteenth-century ‘domestic fiction’ have argued that the novel…naturalizes marriage as a restrictive apolitical telos of women’s lives…we can critique the absence of meaningful vocation for women without identifying marriage in itself as a negative phenomenon. Marriage…is ‘awful in the nearness it brings’ (797). Yet its ‘awfulness’ or resemblance to the crushing sublime does not detract from the value it can have in individual lives. (303)

This identification of marriage as not inherently “a negative phenomenon,” but a relationship with “value,” is a validation of its potential as a venue for self-expression of desires. In addition, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, via Bege K. Bowers “describe Dorothea’s marriage to Will as ‘the most subversive act available to her within the context defined by the author, since it is the only act prohibited by the stipulations of the dead man, and by her family and friends’” (115). By joining herself to someone who is, in the words of Sir James, “not a man we can take into the family,” Dorothea removes
herself from the influence and disapproval of her family and community (Eliot 626). In fact, there is no other character appropriate for her, as “Dorothea’s ardor finds no answering response in anyone but Ladislaw” (Szirotny 21). As he explains of Dorothea, making his devotion to her clear, “I never had a preference for her, any more than I have a preference for breathing. No other woman exists by the side of her. I would rather touch her hand if it were dead, than I would touch any other woman’s living” (599), affirming their mutual attraction and fitness for each other – which it must be observed after her marital trials with the much older Casaubon, is further supported by their nearness in age (which in turn offers the possibility that theirs is a love match).

It is Dorothea’s peace with the evolving events in her life that bring her story to a close. Her eventual happiness depends on her choosing a life partner for her whole self, not just the portions of herself that she upholds as superior (such as her intellect over corporeal sensuality). Her life with Ladislaw suggests that marriage offers the possibility for satisfaction and fulfillment, if only one exercises one’s power of choice appropriately and heeds, and in turn manages, one’s desires. Though Karen Chase suggests, “it would be hasty to claim that Middlemarch at the last overcomes the tension between epic ambitions and domestic responsibilities” as, in the face of not attaining these “ambitions,” Dorothea regards her life as a disappointment, there is no indication that she indeed regrets where her decisions have lead her (Eros 185). Though Celia points out that she has now lost her ability to bring her plans to life, Dorothea replies, “On the contrary, dear…I never could do anything that I liked. I have never carried out any plan yet” (Eliot 628). On one hand, Dorothea’s choice should be acceptable by standards of domestic femininity since she is reinscribed into the domestic sphere, and better yet, one that is
middle-class, and not marked by disparity in age; on the other, however, since it ignores the standards of her community her choice is seen as problematic. Ultimately, despite the widely-shared feeling that it was 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,” we have no reason to believe that her marriage is an unhappy one (Eliot 638). As the narrator intones, Dorothea “never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw…They were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it. No life would have been possible to Dorothea which was not filled with emotion, and she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself.” Her husband “became an ardent public man, which “Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help” (Eliot 638). Here, at last, she is able to direct her energies to something that is both personally fulfilling and impactful to the community, just as she had hoped throughout Middlemarch.

To choose the life one imagines for one’s self and create a life of personal meaning is, as I have suggested, a clear ideal of liberalism. While it is unclear if any society has or will attain perfect support of liberal ideals, it is revealing to uncover who seems most hampered in this struggle and what that says about the nature of the tyranny, to use Mill’s language, that a society practices. The gap between what one imagines and what one lives speaks volumes both about the responsibility and possibility for individual choice; not living what we imagine is possible reveals not just a failure of effort but also the presence of damning limitations. The presence of such limitations makes clear just how far a
society is from attaining compliance with the ideals of liberalism, for as Hobhouse explains they are rooted in “a movement of liberation, a clearance of obstructions, an opening of channels for the flow of free spontaneous vital activity” (22). This “clearance of obstructions” that he suggests is part and parcel of liberalism acknowledges that there are factors which limit the expression of “free spontaneous vital activity” – though they are also limitations that liberalism embraces, such as that of self-government. In the example of Eliot’s Dorothea, we see the expression of those obstructions upon the manifestation of her desires – those both internally and externally applied. For, while Eliot shows that though marriage can be problematic, for whatever the reason, it can also be fruitful for the individual, and though she chooses for herself, and there are issues with her choices within the text, Eliot’s heroine experiences growth and then happiness from those choices. In her marriage to Casaubon, she experiences those obstructions in unexpected and disappointing ways, illustrating the experience of living without a “flow of free spontaneous vital activity.” Instead, as is clear by novel’s end, it is far easier and more satisfying to govern and manage the self if one’s needs are being met and one’s desires are being answered, as is the case within Dorothea’s marriage to Ladislaw.

Dorothea’s choice to remarry, and in that choice assume a role firmly fixed within the demands of the domestic sphere unavailable in her marriage to Casaubon, calls for a final point of analysis. As Chase and Levenson explain, this reengagement with a wifely role within the domestic sphere is one that Dickens uses to validate his age-disparate marriage. Of the now wiser and fully devoted young wife, they write that “she long ago learned, and now must say openly, that the match would have been ‘most wretched,’ because there can be no disparity in marriage like unsuitability of mind and purpose.’ Sat
next to this fatal disparity of temperament, the contrast in age disappears at a stroke” (98). Dickens chooses to subdue the problematic aspects of his age-disparate couple by affirming that their likeness in “temperament” is of greater importance than any issues that may arise due to their “contrast in age.” As they explain, “what makes her a fit mate is that even as the lively daughter/wife she has learned how to be quiet; she knows how to distribute her pleasures and brightens, finding her satisfaction in the many little tasks rather than in the great romantic embrace” (100). The now “quiet” “daughter/wife” of Dickens’s story becomes a “fit” Victorian spouse though her manifestation and embrace of the values and behaviors of domestic femininity, seemingly offering hope that an age-disparate coupling can be successful and fulfilling. However, as Chase and Levenson explain, “the pleasing outcome cannot cancel the uneasiness,” as the threat inherent in these problematic pairings is too resonant (99). While Dickens attempts to affirm the marriage of his characters haunted by “the problem of age,” and does so for the most part, Eliot offers no such validation, instead affirming that “problem” within the pages of *Middlemarch* in the example of Dorothea and Casaubon, and reinforcing it is one that is a stand-in for the larger problem of the inconsistent manifestation of desire.
Notes

1 Both Selma B. Brody and Deborah Wynne compare Eliot’s novel and its heroine to other nineteenth-century novels, with the former exploring the similarities between the marital choices and experience of Dorothea and Henry James’s Isabel Archer, and the latter focusing on “constricting social codes surrounding marriage and property” as illustrated by Eliot and Dinah Mulock Craik (160). Other recent criticism has included a diverse number of interests. Andrew Leng and Joseph Nicholes explore *Middlemarch*’s connections to Pre-Raphaelite art, while Kathleen McCormack and James Harrison explore the novel’s presentation of the art of the Vatican museum and Rome. Alan Shelston suggests that “language may be an effective instrument of communication, if properly used and understood,” giving Casaubon, “the tragic hero of the first half” of Eliot’s novel, as an example of a character who fails in this effort whether in writing or speaking (26, 21). In his analysis of psychological aspects of *Middlemarch*, Gordon Hirsch presents “the points” within Eliot’s novel “where emotion, society, and ethical thought intersect” particularly through the socially “disruptive” and “binding” aspects of shame and ardor as seen within Dorothea and Casaubon’s marriage (83).

2 As Sherry L. Mitchell explains, “Eliot focuses on the wasted practical potential of talented women like Dorothea” who “live at a time when the only approved vocation for women is marriage” (33). This sentiment is an echo of Hobhouse’s lamentation that “the larger wrong done by the repression of women is not the loss to women themselves who constitute one half of the community, but the impoverishment of the community as whole, the loss of all the elements in the common stock which the free play of the women’s mind would contribute” (48). Lest one think this is solely a nineteenth-century concern, Harvard President Lawrence H. Summers’s recent remarks concerning the possible role biological differences play in the under-representation of women in high-ranking positions within the sciences elicited a response that also echoed that of Hobhouse. The presidents of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University, and Stanford University wrote a letter expressing concern that “increasing competition in technological innovation from abroad and the lagging performance of American students make encouraging more women to pursue careers in the sciences a crucial challenge. ‘Until women can feel as much at home in math, science, and engineering as men, our nation will be considerably less than the sum of its parts’ (Bombardieri).

3 As Mill explains of the demands of the domestic realm on wives and mothers: “The superintendence of a household, even when not in other respects laborious, is extremely onerous to the thoughts; it requires incessant vigilance, an eye which no detail escapes, and presents questions for consideration and solution, foreseen and unforeseen, at every hour of the day, from which the person responsible for them can hardly ever shake herself free. If a woman is of a rank and circumstances which relieve her in a measure from these cares, she has still devolving on her the management for the whole family of its intercourse with others -- of what is called society, and the less the call made on her by the former duty, the greater is always the development of the latter: the dinner parties, concerts, evening parties, morning visits, letter-writing, and all that goes with them” (*Subjection* 73).
With the rise of the middle-class, came “the development of specific female ideal,” one that privileged domestic femininity over previous century’s exaltation of aristocratic female qualities (Armstrong 8). This change in the “female ideal” was paired with the development of an “ideology of domesticity which ties women into the home and stresses their role as wife and mother,” was one that soon came to become a standard by which all women were held (Hall 68). An additional area of the responsibilities associated with this “role” are ones that are concerned with the semiotics of the family’s status: “The home, often figured as a haven with its attending angel, can be decoded so that we recognize it as a theater for the staging of a family’s position, a staging that depends on a group of prescribed domestic practices” (Langland 9). This attention to the “theater” of domestic practices is another aspect of conventional domestic femininity that would demand the attentions of Dorothea. However, as Mr. Brooke admits, she is “not fond of show, a great establishment, balls, dinners, that kind of thing. I can see that Casaubon's ways might suit you better than Chettam's” (61). Once again, marriage to Casaubon offers relief from these and other unwanted distractions from the socially significant and impactful life she imagines for herself.

As June Skye Szirtotny explains, “many feminists are indignant that [Eliot] did not present models of successful women…But she is wanted to expose the reasons of her suffering, not celebrate her expensive victory” (25). Barbara Hardy provides an additional perspective on the lack of discernibly feminist sentiment in Middlemarch: “Dorothea is embedded in her time, thirty years before the feminist movements and controversies of the eighteen-sixties” – making her more a product of the time the setting of her novel rather than the time of its writing (Narrators 104).

Psychological aspects of Dorothea’s sexual dissatisfaction provide credence to the fear that its assumed existence in her marriage to Casaubon will cause marital disaster. Mildred S. Greene observes that “the ‘jagged fragmentariness of the ruins Dorothea encounters in the Vatican museum suggests her sexual frustration in marriage” (“G. Eliot’s” 27), a scenario of “repression” that “is corrected by Dorothea’s sexual expression in her second marriage to Ladislaw (“Another” 31). Ignês Sodré adds that Dorothea’s spurning of her mother’s jewelry “seems to show that Dorothea’s Puritanism and contempt for her sister’s femininity hide a fear that sexuality will cause a loss of control and regression to an infant state (202).
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sarah Bleakney received her B.A. in English from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, after which she pursued a career and studies in technical communications. After her relocation to Jacksonville, Florida, she realized she missed the classroom and began taking literature classes. It was there that she made three discoveries: that she still had a facility for and enjoyment of working with literature, that technical communications did not have the making of a lifelong career, and that the University of Florida would allow her to pursue graduate work in her newly discovered interest in Victorian studies. Sarah will continue on in Gainesville to pursue her Ph.D.