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Review of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*: A Guide for Students and Readers of the Novel

Josie Billington

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**Josie Billington, *George Eliot's Middlemarch:*
*A Guide for Students and Readers of the Novel***

**A CD-ROM designed by The Department of English Literature,
Chester College of Higher Education, Parkgate Road, Chester, CH1 4BJ.**

Among certain readers of this review, those already equipped with personal computers capable of launching Cruise missiles at the twitch of a mouse, my opening paragraph will, if anything, pucker lips. But among the uninitiated it will probably furrow brows. For some, it will be more than enough to learn that the minimum system requirements for using this CD-ROM are a Pentium processor running at 100 MHz; a Graphics display card capable of 800 x 600 resolution in HiColor (16 bit); the installation of QuickTime™ 3 (which can be downloaded from the disc, if necessary); an 8 x speed CD-ROM drive; Windows 95/98/NT; 24MB of RAM; and a sound card – more than enough, I say, to stop them dead in their tracks and then move on to something less preoccupied with Bill Gates and more, the gods willing, with George Eliot.

If you belong to that second category of readers and you're prepared to give me one more chance to stop speaking in tongues, then your reward is to learn that this CD-ROM is worth the effort of mastering a tiny bit of computer know-how. In fact, forget the jargon: the only thing you really need is what most of us computer users have: the skill to (i) place a CD-ROM in the right (only?) tray of a functioning computer and (ii) operate a mouse. If that all sounds reasonable, then something even more impressive could take place: you too could have quick, easy access to a considerable and very well thought out body of George Eliot material – all, quite literally, at the end of an index fingertip.

George Eliot's Middlemarch is advertised as 'an interactive multimedia open learning package in the form of a CD-ROM', which means, the flyer goes on to say, that on the one disk you will find

- the full text of the novel
- a rich variety of pathways into and through the novel based on imaginatively linked exercises and critical discussions
- extensive biographical and contextual material, plus annotated bibliography and critical survey
- a wide range of multimedia options including photographic images, 'talking heads' and audio readings from the novel. (1)

But, I hear some of you say, what is wrong with reading the novel in its conventional form and going to the library and/or lectures and seminars for the rest? Nothing: in fact, Billington makes it clear that this is no more than a study-guide designed to send the CD-ROM reader/viewer/listener back to the novel. In which case, why bother with it? Because, Billington says in her concise but useful introduction pasted to the CD box, 'The aim of this study-guide is to allow you to experience – in a fairly ordered and deliberate way – the vast "inter-relat-

edness” of the structure and concerns of *Middlemarch*. . . . It’s up to you where you begin, since each option should be looked upon as an initial “thread” which, once taken up, will cross, lead to or link with one, more or all of the other options or threads’ (2). For instance, if I begin at the ‘Web-Menu’, which is the starting point after ‘entering’ the CD-ROM, and I choose one of the five options, say, ‘Character/Characterisation’, I immediately have a choice of ten characters to choose from. Let’s say I choose ‘Dorothea’ (and when I say ‘choose’, I mean, of course, ‘click on’). Three options present themselves: a consideration of ‘Dorothea in Chapters 1-3’, ‘Dorothea in Rome’ and ‘Dorothea and the blue & green boudoir’. If I choose the latter, the first of four passage-based questions comes up on the screen, together with the relevant passage from the novel, which I can either read then and there or look up in my own edition. Having made a stab at answering the question, I can now choose the ‘Discussion’ icon, where I find a good and detailed critical reading of the passage. As I read along, I come across words or phrases or titles highlighted in various colours – for example, ‘Dorothea in Rome’ (in green). If I choose that highlight, I’m immediately shown a contrasting passage and commentary, with its own cross-references, which I can follow if I so choose. If I find that I’ve rather lost the thread of my starting point, I can retrace my steps in the exact reverse order in which I came. And at each stage of my backtracking, I can – may well be tempted to – branch off on another ‘thread’ that will take me roaming through other parts of the novel and its concerns. Along the way, I will come across more passages for comparison and contrast, definitions of words or phrases, critical approaches to various aspects of the novel, pictures and ‘Talking Heads’.

The ‘Talking Heads’ feature is found in the ‘Critical/Bibliographical Survey/Contexts’ option (another of the five main options). Having chosen the latter, I can choose ‘Video Bank’ in which there are eight short videos on offer (one of the eight, ‘Text to Screen’, discusses film versions of *Middlemarch* and even includes a two and a half minute clip from the 1994 BBC adaptation). The ‘Talking Heads’, I take it, are members of the Department of English Literature, Chester College of Higher Education, who, Billington’s introduction indicates, also contributed to various parts of the critical discussions and exercises ‘totalling 250000 words’. The quality of the sound and pictures is comparable to what I’ve seen on other CD-ROMs, that is to say not too good, but the content of the mini lectures is.

Having seen how the CD-ROM works (and it is ‘user-friendly’), did I like it, was I impressed? Yes, very. The critical discussions are scholarly, always closely focused on the text, and accessible because they are jargon-free. The CD-ROM is, according to the flyer that accompanied my copy, ‘designed for undergraduate and post-graduate students of literature and can be used to replace or to support lectures and seminars as part of, for instance: single-author modules on George Eliot; period-based modules on Victorian literature or the Victorian novel; generic modules on nineteenth-century realism’. I checked: there are indeed discussions and exercises on all of these subjects and they’re always very worthwhile.

I do have some reservations, however. When the novel is called up on screen, it can’t be searched, using a ‘Find’ function. That means you can’t use the computer to help you identify passages with recurring words, phrases, images and so on. Such a facility is of tremendous use

when exploring the novel and, I think, should be made available in future editions. Then I have a minor quibble about the picture gallery in the 'Contexts' option: are the pictures of the stiff and rather comical George Eliot, George Lewes and John Cross figures in the Nuneaton Library really necessary? Lastly, I frequently had to resort to the 'Ctrl+Alt Gr+Delete' method of exiting the CD-ROM, because my screen usually 'froze' when I chose 'Quit' – and that did make me think seriously about the desirability of calling up Cruise missiles. But, to be fair, the good in this package by far outweighs the bad: this is an excellent study-guide.

A. G. van den Broek
Forest School