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Judith Johnston  
*MIDDLEMARCH'S DOROTHEA BROOKE AND  
MEDIEVAL HAGIOGRAPHY\**



Angels bear St. Catherine to Mount Sinai (Mücke)

*See below, page 44*

Saint Theresa's life of achievement is offered as a contrast to the heroine of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke, and all that Dorothea fails to achieve. George Eliot examines Dorothea's life in part through the medium of medieval hagiography, a form which recognises the tensions and crises through which a martyr passes. But George Eliot depends upon the paradox that martyrdom is achieved as readily from submissiveness and ineffectuality as from resistance and effective administration. Thus Eliot offers the reader a heroine whose life passes through a state of metamorphosis which is very like the passage through martyrdom regardless of whether the saint be a Dorothea or a Theresa.

Eliot's discourse in the opening paragraph of the 'Prelude' to *Middlemarch* seeks for harmony and selflessness on a national scale but offers at the same time that limiting contrast 'domestic reality'.<sup>1</sup> Theresa rejects chivalry and romance for an epic life that is illuminated and strengthened by a staunch religious faith. She symbolises reform that is accomplished not through violent disruptiveness but through hard, consistent work and strong-willed determination.

The second paragraph of the 'Prelude' introduces a new note, the other 'Therasas' who have 'no epic life', and more importantly, 'no coherent social faith' (26) and are finally dispersed.

Nothing any new Theresa does will be recorded in history. Yet Eliot offers Dorothea Brooke as a 'Saint Theresa', and assumes that her 'life of mistakes', her 'tragic failure' is worth recording. Note the predominantly negative lexis of this second paragraph of the 'Prelude'. Paradoxically, 'formlessness' gives us a clue to the novel's construct. Formlessness is a word used often to describe medieval romance. As the narrative of *Middlemarch* proceeds it will be noted how often a character is embryonic, or in a state of metamorphosis. Formlessness means that barriers and definitions are broken down, allowing the possibility of eventual reformation. This re-formation, because it is literary and not realistic, is non-violent. By resisting any one form or mode of discourse, Eliot reveals a literary quest that is bound towards altering the shape of the modes of discourse available to her. If we couple this impetus to that of the narrative quest which seeks some alteration to the shape of society, we see how carefully generic definitions and overturnings are being handled.

Eliot orchestrates a collision by producing, against expectation, a heroine who achieves very little. The reader is deliberately left to question why Theresa achieves what Dorothea cannot. If Saints' Lives examined crises, both moral and physical, from which martyrs emerged, such a crisis or tension is the same type of tension Dorothea finds between the prosaic world in which she lives and her dream of an epic life. It is this tension which Eliot examines in Dorothea's characterisation. The tension of a changing society, moving towards the major political Reform Act of 1832, the first to legally discriminate against women, is seen paralleled in Dorothea's movement towards the active life for which she yearns. This life, in essence, is a reforming of the traditional woman's role in Victorian society.

Activity is to the epic life what passivity is to romance. Dorothea, in the first pages of chapter one, is described as inheriting from her forbears an 'hereditary strain of Puritan energy' (31) and in her this energy vibrates. She is also 'rash' (30) and fervid. Dorothea will attempt to reject romance in favour of an epic life into which she may pour all her pent-up energy. Instead she finds herself struggling with 'mere inconsistency and formlessness' (25) because she mistakenly imagines that marriage to the Reverend Edward Casaubon will offer her an epic life. Casaubon will be her teacher. The knowledge she gains, however, is not the knowledge she sought or expected, and all her activity and ardour is repressed and controlled, reducing her to passivity. Casaubon is Dorothea's 'domestic reality', just as the uncles restrained Theresa from her 'child-pilgrimage' (25) by enforcing their 'domestic reality'.

The medieval saint or martyr has a medieval literary context - the genre known as Hagiography, or Saint's Life. Helen C. White explains how, along with genuine legends, there arose a set of fictional religious romances built like the stories of an historical novelist.<sup>2</sup> She adds that the medieval hagiographer wanted to examine 'the moral and physical crises out of which Martyrs are made, and the intellectual and spiritual tensions through which saints come to their glory' (35).

In her fiction Eliot wishes to examine similar tensions and crises in the lives of her characters. If they do not 'come to their glory', some characters do at least emerge changed - for the better - into a social world that is about to undergo its own metamorphosis. Will and Dorothea marry just before the passage of the 1832 Reform Bill through the House of Lords. Eliot's 'Prelude' has made it clear that this is a novel for those who care 'much to know the history of man' (25) but it is to be history seen through the life of a saint or a martyr who is 'foundress of nothing'; a history never to be recorded in any official documentation.

Eliot's introduction of Dorothea in chapter one warns the reader that this is a heroine who is 'likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all' (30). In choosing Casaubon Dorothea unconsciously seeks martyrdom. This makes her contrast to Saint Theresa more complex because Theresa is fully conscious of the difficulties that her desire for reform will create. Yet we are also informed of similarities between the two women as well. If Dorothea had written a book, for instance, 'she must have done it as a saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience' (112).

Saint Theresa, however, is not the only saint with whom Dorothea is compared. As the novel unfolds Dorothea is aligned with the medieval saints Barbara, Clare, and Catherine of Alexandria, the allusions culminating in Lydgate's comparison of Dorothea with the Virgin Mary. The comparisons of Dorothea with these various saintly women are produced in terms of their artistic representations, rather than with direct reference to their historical or legendary lives. This enhances the sense of passivity and, moreover, is in accordance with the novel's opening description of Dorothea:

Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters (29).

Thus Dorothea as Saint Barbara might have been 'a picture' (114); posing for a painting of Santa Clara she must 'stand - leaning so' (249); and in widowhood she does not want 'to sit like a model for Saint Catherine' (579).

None of the allusions to these saints suggest saintliness in Dorothea's characterisation - rather their dominating force is to suggest variously through the text how a woman forced to conform to a certain pattern will become constricted and restrained. The added dimension of the framed painting or stiff unyieldingness of a woodcut depiction confirms this sense of constriction and restraint.

Medieval hagiography, however, permits the notion that Dorothea is not merely submissive and ineffectual in her relationship with Casaubon, but, by association with martyrdom, suggests instead that her submissiveness and ineffectuality is heroic. The analogies with medieval saints occur along the journey that Dorothea makes at moments in the text when her life is about to take a new direction such as her engagement to Casaubon, her meeting with Will, and Casaubon's death.

For instance, during the short period of Dorothea's engagement to Casaubon we are told that

Sometimes when Dorothea was in company, there seemed to be as complete an air of repose about her as if she had been a picture of Santa Barbara looking out from her tower into the clear air (114).

Barbara was a virgin-martyr, and this description reveals how carefully Eliot chooses each comparison with a saint. Dorothea too will be a virgin-martyr willingly sacrificing herself on the altar of Casaubon's vaunted learning: 'Surely learned men kept the only oil; and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon?' (113)

Saint Barbara became a cult figure in the late Middle Ages, partly through the popularity of the medieval hagiography *The Golden Legend*. Barbara's usual emblem is a tower. Eliot had seen a statue of Saint Barbara in Venice, and writes:

And Palma Vecchio too must be held in grateful reverence for his Santa Barbara, standing in calm grand beauty above an altar in the Church of Santa Maria Formosa. It is an almost unique presentation of a hero-woman, standing in calm preparation for martyrdom, without the slightest air of pietism, yet with the expression of a mind filled with serious conviction.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the slightness of the allusion to Barbara in the text of *Middlemarch*, the comparison of this particular saint with Dorothea must have included Eliot's memories of the 'hero-woman' and her 'calm preparation for martyrdom'. The allusion enhances Dorothea's remoteness from her contemporary world, and predicts the struggle to come; it also suggests that Dorothea is passive, and here there is irony because Casaubon believes that Dorothea's air of repose reveals her true nature.

Following Casaubon's death Dorothea undergoes a metamorphosis from passivity to activity:

After three months Freshitt had become rather oppressive: to sit like a model for Saint Catherine looking rapturously at Celia's baby would not do for many hours in the day (579).

When Anna Jameson in *Sacred and Legendary Art* describes the many depictions of Saint Catherine, the adoration of the infant Christ is mentioned frequently. Eliot herself was taken with Raphael's painting of Saint Catherine which she describes as a 'bright picture'.<sup>4</sup> This is the fourth and last comparison of Dorothea with a particular saint. Significantly these comparisons cease with Casaubon's death. His death releases Dorothea from her passivity.

Eliot extracted pertinent details on Saint Catherine of Alexandria from Anna Jameson's book. She noted that Catherine is 'the patron of education and philosophy, theologians,

students and eloquence' (63), and eloquence forms a vital part of Dorothea's characterisation. It is her voice that first attracts Will Ladislaw. Eliot concluded her notes on Saint Catherine as follows: 'And when she was dead angels took her body and carried it over the desert and over the Red Sea, till they brought it to Mount Sinai where they buried it in a marble sepulchre'.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, *Middlemarch* will end on the word 'tombs'.

Dorothea escapes from her marriage tomb, released from the self-repression, her living death, occasioned by a life with Casaubon. She argues with Celia about returning to Lowick. There is an obvious upsurge of strength and power and resolution in Dorothea which enables her to step away from the static frames in which those around her would restrain her if they could. The narrator comments that 'Dorothea's native strength of will was no longer all converted into submission' (580).

Eliot's initial, careful association of her heroine with the medieval discourse hagiography, as a submerged metaphor for self-repression and marital oppression, signals how important it is that Dorothea be able to walk away from the tomb alive and whole. When she discards restraint, her characterisation no longer depends upon hagiography, which is displaced by a secular narrative (as Casaubon is displaced by Will).

Harriet Farwell Adams argues that in the 'Prelude' to *Middlemarch*, Eliot had 'projected a special brand of tragedy for Dorothea'<sup>6</sup> and adds that the 'Finale' is only connected to the 'Prelude' and not to the content and intent of *Middlemarch* as a whole text. Adams underestimates the ironic tone in which the 'Prelude' is written and the extent to which, as the previous discussion has shown, the implications of the 'Prelude' permeate the narrative of *Middlemarch*. Instead she believes that Eliot's amalgamation of the two texts, 'Miss Brooke' and 'Middlemarch' alters the initial intent of the 'Prelude' so that 'issues that dropped out of sight were martyrdom, the special lot of women, women's education and Saint Theresa'(10).

Yet these are the very issues that remain continually at the forefront of the novel, as the narrative looks into the lives and habits of the people of Middlemarch. It recognises that the issue of Reform affects every aspect of Eliot's novel, the reader understands how the image of Saint Theresa, the successful, and female, reformer and educator, consistently informs any reading of the entire text, not only because Theresa was successful but because she was a woman. Adams suggests that Dorothea is removed as the novel's central focus (10) yet every issue of the novel, from women's education to marriage, every character from Will Ladislaw to Rosamond Vincy, reflects back upon and revolves around Dorothea.

Dorothea's 'special tragedy' is the ordinary tragedy of most people. In the 'Finale' Eliot offers a paradox because she uses martyrdom as a referent for ordinary tragedy, and martyrdom is both tragedy and triumph. It is often assumed that the quarter in which Dorothea is likely 'to incur martyrdom after all' (30), is Dorothea's initial renunciation of Will. But the quarter in which Dorothea actually incurs martyrdom is in her second

marriage, 'a quarter where she had not sought it' (30). Dorothea's marriage is essential to Eliot's examination of ordinary lives and an integral component of her 'reform' theme. This marriage to Will Ladislaw, based on sexual attraction and mutual love though it is, still entails Dorothea's giving up, 'renunciation', of the shaping of her own life and 'doing better things' (589), in her recognition of the 'nearness' that marriage brings and the necessity of walking 'always in fear of hurting another who is tied to us' (855).

Saint Theresa was not the last of her kind, but, says Eliot, not all saints live an epic life. Some, like Dorothea, are condemned to an ordinary life. This is their tragedy. Once 'domestic reality' had forced Theresa back from a pilgrimage. 'Domestic reality' becomes Dorothea's burden, turning her away from consistency, form, coherence and order, from the main river, to a life that 'spent itself in channels' (896). This is her martyrdom. It is here that we see the connection to a possible hagiography that is very new in concept: the celebration of an ordinary life filled with ordinary errors, and lived according to a personal code as tenuous as 'the perfect Right' (846) which strives by an act of will to reach beyond personal needs towards the needs of others - formlessness indeed. Dorothea's passage through the pages of *Middlemarch* is a painful lesson with all the force and suffering of a religious allegory.

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\* This article is drawn from my doctoral thesis titled *George Eliot and the Medieval Context* (1989).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. W.J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965). All subsequent references are to this edition. As a counter-reformer, Theresa is more a medieval saint than a modern one. She looked back to the hermits of the thirteenth century who had begun her order when she needed a model on which to reform the Carmelites. See Franklin E. Court, 'The Image of St. Theresa in *Middlemarch* and Positive Ethics', *Victorian Newsletter* 63 (1983): 22

<sup>2</sup> Helen C. White, *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1963), 29

<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, 'Recollections of Italy, 1860', Autograph MS Journal of a trip to Germany, Ap. 14 - Oct. 27, 1858, Beinecke Microfilm 24, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

<sup>4</sup> Eliot wrote to Martha Jackson 21 April 1845: 'you are a bright picture in my memory, like Raphael's St. Catherine'. *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven, 1954-78), 1, 188

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot: A Writer's Notebook 1854-1879 and some Uncollected Writings*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1981), 63. Eliot's 'Recollections of Berlin, 1855' included a description of Consul Wagner's art collection. Among the works Eliot considered 'arresting' she cites 'St. Catherine being carried by angels to her grave on Mt. Sinai by Mucke', 44, Autograph Journal, 1854-1861, Beinecke Microfilm 24, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript, Yale University

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Farwell Adams, 'Prelude and Finale to *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Newsletter* 68 (1985): 9