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Review of Middlemarch's Three New Editions

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**George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston
(Everyman Paperbacks, 1997), pp. xxxiv + 814. £2.99.**

**George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by David Carroll with a new Introduction
by Felicia Bonaparte (World's Classics, 1997), pp. xlviii + 849. £2.99.**

**George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by Rosemary Ashton (Penguin, 1994),
pp. xxiv + 853. £2.99.**

Readers of *Middlemarch*, it is a pleasure to report, are now spoilt for choice. Joining an already saturated market are three new paperback editions, attractively produced at a very reasonable price with full critical apparatus, including textual notes, explanatory notes, introductions, chronologies, recommendations for further reading and even, in the case of the Everyman Paperbacks edition, a synopsis of the plot chapter by chapter (although the editors are quick to point out that this is 'intended to serve as an index, not as analysis', nor presumably as a substitute for reading the novel itself). The Everyman edition claims on its back cover to be 'the most comprehensive paperback edition available', a claim which further investigation will in fact justify.

To begin with the chronology: the Penguin provides nothing beyond the customary opening page's summary of the author's life, World's Classics has four pages focusing entirely on the events of George Eliot's life but the Everyman places its 'Chronology of George Eliot's Life' on parallel pages with a 'Chronology of Her Times', split between literary and historical events. Beginning with the invention of the stethoscope in 1816, this includes the founding of the *Lancet*, the opening of the first railway, the introduction of the Catholic Emancipation Act and of the First Reform Bill, as well as details of major cholera outbreaks, of election rioting in Nuneaton and other events of the times in which the novel is both set and written, details which the most old-fashioned of New Critics could hardly claim to be irrelevant to a reading of this most self-consciously historical of novels.

All these editions, following what the Everyman refers to as W. J. Harvey's 'pioneering Penguin English Classic' edition of 1965 and 'David Carroll's magisterial Clarendon Edition' of 1986, take the one-volume second edition of 1874 as their base text since it was, in Carroll's words, quoted in the Everyman 'Note on the Text', 'the last version of the novel which was thoroughly revised and corrected by George Eliot'. In this respect there is little to choose between these editions, although the Penguin again gives less detail about these revisions, notably the famous changes to the penultimate paragraph of the Finale. The other two editions provide in their notes the versions of this passage in both the manuscript and the first edition; the Penguin gives just the latter.

It is in the notes that the differences between these editions are most marked, most obviously in terms of length. While the Penguin provides fifteen pages, mainly, as Ashton acknowledges,

based upon Harvey's original notes, World's Classics reproduces the twenty-seven pages of Carroll's earlier edition (1988) while the Everyman, in obedience to the promise of its motto, 'Everyman, I will go with thee, and by thy guide', amasses forty-five pages of notes. In comparing the notes, there were some noticeable similarities in wording, similarities mostly traceable to their shared source, Harvey (the Q of these redactions), whose own principles are worth quoting. In 'A Note on the Notes' at the back of his original Penguin Classic, Harvey acknowledged that a 'fully annotated edition of *Middlemarch* would be an immense and probably tedious affair', so restricted himself to notes 'intended mainly to throw light on only those passages or references which might, if left unexplained, hamper the reader in his understanding of the world depicted in the novel' (897-8). Notice that readers were still male in those days, while Everyman addresses an audience expected to be interested in gender issues.

Perhaps because the editors of Everyman are from Sydney, they also assume readers who will be grateful for information about nineteenth-century Europe, information which I suspect will come as news to most English readers too. I doubt, for example, if most readers of the Penguin and World's Classics editions will be able unaided (as they are in those editions) to place Lausanne, Freiberg and Heidelberg, so important for the early life of Dorothea and Ladislav, on a socio-cultural map of nineteenth-century Europe. The Everyman explains that 'Lausanne rivalled Geneva as the intellectual and cultural capital of French Switzerland', that Freiberg was the centre of Swiss Catholicism and that Heidelberg, 'founded in 1386, had regained prestige in the nineteenth century particularly as a centre for the study of sciences, law and philosophy'. All we get in the text itself is Dorothea's confession to sobbing when being taken from Lausanne to hear the organ at Freiberg and Casaubon's description of Ladislav's choice of university as 'anomalous'. The notes here help readers to understand the tensions between self-repressively Protestant and aesthetically Catholic strands of Dorothea's temperament and upbringing and to appreciate more fully the breadth and boldness of Ladislav's choice.

Nothing seems too minor for the editors of the Everyman to comment on. They speculate, for example, on the possible origin of Farebrother's first name, which many readers of the novel may struggle even to remember. Such detail, of course, was of immense importance to George Eliot herself, as Felicia Bonaparte remarks in relation to Lydgate's name, which she sees itself as 'a footnote meant to point us to John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*', a medieval tale in whose third book (Latin *tertius*) physicians are said to delight in possession of the material. St Ladislaus, she also notes, was a canonised King of Hungary. All this is clearly relevant to any reading of the novel.

Only occasionally does the Everyman assume perhaps too much ignorance on the part of its readers, for example in glossing Fred's reputation as 'a gay young fellow'. The word here, they soberly assert, 'is used in the sense of "addicted to social pleasures and dissipation" (*OED*)'. It would be a fairly crass reader of the novel, one would have thought, who would be prompted by this phrase to suspect Fred's relationship with Farebrother. Other comments upon historical linguistic changes are more helpful. When the narrator remarks of Lydgate's gambling at the Green Dragon, 'A philosopher fallen to betting is hardly distinguishable from a Philistine', it is interesting to be told that the first citation of philistine in the *OED* is from

Carlyle in 1827. They might also have noted Riehl's use of the word, picked up by George Eliot herself in her 1856 review. Where, it might be asked, does the process of annotation stop? What might a Longman edition of *Middlemarch* look like? The mind boggles, but it does on any reading of *Middlemarch* anyway, so I would defend the details of the Everyman notes as almost always informative and helpful.

The introductions to the these editions are all quite helpful in their own way. Rosemary Ashton's provides straightforward and unpretentious information about George Eliot's life, paying particular attention to her intellectual development. Felicia Bonaparte's is the fullest, also dwelling on the intellectual aspect of the book, its registering of the challenges to 'the three conceptual universes at the forefront of her century'. Margaret Harris, in her brief introduction (twelve pages against Ashton's fifteen and Bonaparte's thirty-four but bolstered by an additional section at the end of the book on 'George Eliot and Her Critics') pays more attention to recent debates about omniscient narration in the so-called classic realist text, noticing the dialogue between the epigraphs to each chapter and the main body of the text, all of which indicates an awareness of recent criticism reflected in her helpful 'Suggestions for Further Reading', which are fuller and more up-to-date than the equivalent sections in the other editions.

The Everyman also includes a section entitled 'George Eliot and Her Critics', which summarises the changing fortunes of the novel from its contemporary reception to the present day, including excerpts from essays by Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf, Barbara Hardy, J. Hillis Miller and a number of feminist critics whose informed disagreement is designed to stimulate further reading and reflection. Harris ends her introduction with a recognition of the way *Middlemarch* teaches its readers 'to test the limits of their reading, and to re-evaluate the assumptions on which their reading proceeds'. Her edition produced in collaboration with Judith Johnston, helps readers to do this, I would argue, which is why I would recommend it as the best of the three.

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