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Hardy, Barbara, "Elizabeth Gaskell in Middlemarch: Timothy Cooper, The Judgement of Solomon, and the Woman at the Window" (2015). *The George Eliot Review*. 665.

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ELIZABETH GASKELL IN *MIDDLEMARCH*: TIMOTHY COOPER, THE JUDGEMENT OF SOLOMON, AND THE WOMAN AT THE WINDOW¹

By Barbara Hardy

In ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’² Gaskell and Harriet Martineau were the only living novelists George Eliot praised, and very briefly. George Eliot and Gaskell never met but corresponded, admired each other’s work, and in several books George Eliot unconsciously drew on details and characters from Gaskell novels.³ There are three important details in *Middlemarch* – which Gaskell never read because she died before its publication – deriving from *Cousin Phillis*, *Wives and Daughters*, and *North and South*.

Chapter 56 of *Middlemarch* is a meeting-point for history and the personal life. Caleb Garth’s social confidence rings loud as he speaks to the rustic rebels roused to violence by a local *agent provocateur* hoping to hamper the railway survey: ‘Somebody told you the railway was a bad thing. That was a lie. It may do a bit of harm here and there, and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway’s a good thing’. He is answered by a voice we have not heard before and will not hear again, that of a farm labourer, Timothy Cooper, whose response is eloquent in personal particulars and political generalization:

‘Aw! good for the big folks to make money out on,’ said old Timothy Cooper, who had stayed behind turning his hay while the others had been gone on their spree;—‘I’n seen lots o’ things turn up sin’ I war a young ‘un—the war an’ the pe-ace an’ the canells [...] an’ it’s been all aloike to the poor mon. What’s the canells been t’ him? They’n brought him neyther me-at nor ba-acon, nor wage to lay by, if he didn’t save it wi’ clemmin’ his own inside. Times ha’ got wusser for him sin’ I war a young un. [...] This is the big folks’s world, this is. But yo’re for the big folks, Muster Garth, yo are.’ (*Middlemarch*, ch. 56)

This episode creates a nonce character who appears in one chapter, speaks twice, is tersely described as a wiry old labourer who keeps his savings in a stocking-foot, lives ‘in a lone cottage’ and is said with patronizing humour to have ‘as little of the feudal spirit, and believing as little, as if he had not been totally unacquainted with the Age of Reason and the Rights of Man’.

Caleb was in a difficulty known to any person attempting in dark times and unassisted by miracle to reason with rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth which they know through a hard process of feeling, and let it fall like a giant’s club on your neatly-carved argument for a social benefit which they do *not* feel. (ch. 56)

Caleb self-effacingly sets aside the criticism of his personal position, agrees that things are bad for the poor man, explains that he wants ‘the lads here’ not to make things worse for themselves, and advises the labourers only out ‘for a bit o’ foon’ not to meddle with the survey again. Timothy says he didn’t meddle so has ‘no call to promise’. The narrator’s tone is amused and ironically exasperated as it addresses, and assumes, a sympathetic and superior reader. But Caleb’s very personal answer evades the critique of inequality and though his author may not be aware of it, Timothy articulates a radical political awareness. The big folks did make money from the railways, and Caleb was for the big folks: as Dorothea Casaubon’s land-agent he is observed humorously though not critically, to be valuing a ‘piece of land belonging to Lowick

Manor' which he 'expected to dispose of advantageously for Dorothea': it was the big folks' world.

George Eliot gave Timothy Cooper a Christian name taken from the bible and a surname from an English craft, but it was also the name of a character in Gaskell's novella *Cousin Phillis* (1865). Gaskell's Timothy uses some of the second Timothy's dialect words, for example, 'clem', 'yo', and 'sin'; and he also criticizes a social superior – the narrator Paul, a railway engineer. Gaskell's Timothy Cooper is more developed than George Eliot's: he is a thorn in the flesh of Holman, good farmer, minister, and Phillis's devoted father, who contemplates changing his bedroom so he will not see incompetent Timothy at work, and eventually sacks him. Regarded by Holman and Paul as little more than an idiot, Timothy redeems himself during Phillis's brain-fever and gets his job back. The characters are not alike, but both are poor labourers unafraid to speak their mind. It is obviously a case of unconscious influence since of course George Eliot would not knowingly use the name of Gaskell's character. When Swinburne accused her of plagiarizing Gaskell's *Moorland Cottage* in *The Mill on the Floss*, with which it has some affinities, she denied having read it: both heroines are 'Maggie' but she would not use that name consciously, so what looks like evidence of plagiarism is the opposite. It is interesting that the radical questioning is articulated by George Eliot, the less political of the two novelists, but her Timothy speaks out against the power and privilege of capital.

Chapter 80 of *Middlemarch* presents a crisis in the inner life of Dorothea, presented by the narrator in free indirect style. Her love for Will, like his for her, is romanticized, but not here where she suffers from disillusion and shock after seeing Will and Rosamond in compromising proximity: 'she discovered her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of despair' but could not utter 'any wail of regretful pity, from the midst of scorn and indignation and jealous offended pride'. Her mixed and divided passions are imaged in 'two living forms that tore her heart in two, as if it had been the heart of a mother who seems to see her child divided by the sword, and presses one bleeding half to her breast while her gaze goes forth in agony towards the half which is carried away by the lying woman that has never known a mother's pang'. The image alludes to the judgement of Solomon in Kings 1: 3, 16-28, and exactly the same allusion was made in Gaskell's last and unfinished novel *Wives and Daughters* (1865), when Molly Gibson painfully conquers her jealousy of her step-sister Cynthia, engaged to the naturalist Roger Hamley for whom she cares little, whom Molly loves, and who is 'ill and unattended in [...] savage lands' (Abyssinia). Molly is compared 'to the real mother in Solomon's judgment', who pleaded, 'Oh my Lord! give her the living child, and in no wise slay it [...]. Let him live, let him live, even though I may never set eyes upon him again' (ch. 37). George Eliot mentions the mother's pang, which like 'the lying woman', and unlike Gaskell, she had 'never known', but what it images, and what Dorothea feels, is shattered desire and love, while for Molly it is self-abnegation of desire, imaged by mother-love.⁴

Of course the biblical story was known to George Eliot, but the *Middlemarch* image occurs in very close proximity to another Gaskell echo. Seven paragraphs later in Chapter 80 there is the famous image drawing on and enlarging the trope of a woman at the window, found in other fiction, and in painting,⁵ and related to several characters in *Middlemarch* though most powerfully to Dorothea. The episode is narrative and descriptive, involving place, action and vision to create a crisis and lead to a conclusion, for several characters and for the novel.

Dorothea looks east, for the first time, her outlook marking a turn in the series of views from her west-facing boudoir which overlooks the grounds of Lowick Manor. In this new dawn she sees from her bedroom 'the bending sky', and 'the pearly light' on a world beyond her and the Casaubon domain: 'On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back, and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog' (ch. 80). She is short-sighted but sees far. After her turmoil of feeling she moves beyond self to the vision and symbol of the human couple and child, their burden and their labour, which make her subdue personal feelings and return to Rosamond and Middlemarch.

The woman at the window in *North and South* is the most striking anticipation of *Middlemarch*, in a chain of images showing Margaret Hale, at her times of crisis, looking out of a window. Like Dorothea, she represents the historic norm: an imaginative, aspiring and developing woman, repressed and oppressed in a woman's time and space, partly defined by comparison with a more conventional woman, her cousin Edith, like Dorothea with her sister Celia, and by the chance of a conventional match, with the lawyer Henry Lennox, like Dorothea with Sir James Chettam. For both heroines the final happy marriage is facilitated by money. For Margaret it is her godfather's legacy with which she can save the career of her lover John Thornton, for Dorothea a sufficient inheritance on which she and Will can live while he works as MP in the first Reform Parliament. The imagery of exalted naming is another link between these heroines whose virtues and ideals are expansively social: Dorothea's name means 'gift of god', and Margaret's derives from 'pearl', 'the Pearl of great price' in a parable (Matthew 36) and perhaps the late fourteenth-century poem, *Pearl*. Her scholarly godfather Mr Bell calls her 'the Pearl' (ch. 40).

The first window-scene in *North and South* comes after a long distressing day in which Margaret is shocked by Henry Lennox's proposal of marriage and his bitter response to her refusal, and by her father's disclosure that for reasons of conscience he must leave the Anglican ministry and the family must leave Helstone, their beloved home village in the New Forest:

She looked out upon the dark-grey lines of the church towers, square and straight in the centre of the view, cutting against the deep blue transparent depths beyond, into which she gazed, and felt that she might gaze for ever, seeing at every moment some further distance, and yet no sign of God! It seemed to her at the moment, as if the earth was more utterly desolate than if girt in by an iron dome, behind which there might be the ineffaceable peace and glory of the Almighty; those never-ending depths of space, in their still serenity, were more mocking to her than any natural bounds could be – lost for ever, before they reached His throne. (ch. 5)

Much later, she is staying in Helstone on a sentimental return journey from north to south, and after a day of disillusion and disturbance, she looks out from her room at the village inn, to compare herself with Dante's vision of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini in the *Inferno*. (Both novelists were scholarly readers of Dante, but the Dante references in *Middlemarch* are more romantic than those in *North and South*.)

[S]he sate long hours by the open window, gazing out on the purple dome above, where the stars arose, and twinkled and disappeared behind the great umbrageous trees. [...] All night long too, there burnt a little light in her old bed-room, which was the nursery with the present inhabitants of the parsonage [...].

A sense of change, of individual nothingness, of perplexity and disappointment, overpowers Margaret:

'I am so tired – so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life [...]; it is like the circle in which the victims of earthly passion eddy continually' [...] But with the morning came hope: 'After all it is right' said she, hearing the voices of children at play [...]. 'Looking out of myself, and my own painful sense of change, the progress of all that is around me, is right and necessary,' (ch. 46)

In the scene which concludes the series she is not looking out of a window but at the sea, in Cromer:

She used to sit long hours upon the beach, gazing intently on the waves as they chafed with perpetual motion against the pebbly shore – or she looked out upon the more distant heave and sparkle against the sky, and heard, without being conscious of hearing, the eternal psalm, which went up continually. She was soothed, without knowing how or why [...]. The nurses, sauntering on with their charges, would pass and repass her, and wonder in whispers what she could find to look at so long, day after day. (ch. 49)

She finally decides to take her life and new fortune into her own hands, though the reference to her social work in London is brief, reserved and unspecific.

North and South has another window scene in which a man, Thornton, looks out after a night of conflict and crisis to experience the 'ruddy dawn', and a cold east wind tells him the weather will not change for his commercial convenience. There is no visionary element here, but a similar moral process, and Thornton, like Margaret – and Dorothea – looks out at a world beyond the self and makes a selfless decision (ch. 46). Gaskell's image-pattern of the outward gaze is less systematic than George Eliot's, but its affective and moral form is dynamic and clear.

Gaskell inserted an extra window scene in the second edition of the novel, published later in 1855,⁶ in which Margaret looks at the evening sky from the old nursery in Harley Street, which appeared in the first chapter as a sacred place, like Dorothea's lime avenue. Margaret sees 'faint pink reflections of earthly lights on the soft clouds which float tranquilly into the white moonlight', her moral self-reproach a new feeling, as she wryly recalls her youthful vows to live 'sans peur et sans reproche' (ch. 48). This added scene picks up the religious suggestions in earlier scenes, like the repeated 'dome', the Dantean circle, and the psalms. Gaskell's unitarianism allowed her to introduce a subdued element of religious suggestion completely absent from *Middlemarch*, though the secular response and consequences are central in *North and South* too. In both novels these recurring scenes show the outward gaze and suppression of self in two thwarted, idealistic and historically representative women wondering what they can do in the world and for the world. The second marriage of the creative and visionary Dorothea is a historically representative assimilation into ordinary life, which some – inside and outside the novel – find disappointing; Margaret's marriage with Thornton is a complex fulfilment of social vision and love, though an optimistic simplification. Neither novelist was a politician, but Gaskell was more political than George Eliot. Like her author, Margaret is educated by the streets and slums of the industrial city: she is stoned in a close encounter with industrial violence, and makes friends with a working-class woman, Bessie Higgins, who dies of lung-disease after working in a cotton-mill. *Middlemarch* is socially restricted in

comparison, which is why the appearance of Timothy Cooper is both isolated and important. Perhaps it is no accident that George Eliot's politically subversive speaker unconsciously uses the name of a character in Gaskell.

The title of each novel presides over both stories. In *North and South*, polarities and oppositions must be rejected for Margaret, for the mill-owner Thornton and the trade-unionist Nicholas Higgins. *Middlemarch* offers compromise and an unideal existence for several characters, including the heroine who started off in her own novel, *Miss Brooke*. The titles *North and South* and *Middlemarch* prove more alike than unlike, Gaskell's synecdoche naming spatial extremes, George Eliot's the middle way, but social and psychological extremes and compromises emerge as crucial in both.

The echoes of Gaskell's best novel are crucial too. *Middlemarch* would have been a different novel without Gaskell, in particular without *North and South*, the novel which in spite of its difference in narrative scale, has a political and social scope which make it Gaskell's *Middlemarch*.

Notes

- 1 This article is an extension of a talk given in November 2014 at the *Middlemarch* Conference, Institute of English Studies, University of London.
- 2 *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Worlds Classics, 1992); first published in *The Westminster Review*, 1856.
- 3 I have written on the relationship between the two novelists in 'Two Women: Some Forms of Feeling in *North and South*', *The Gaskell Journal*, 25 (2011), pp. 19-29; 'The Two Timothy Coopers', *The George Eliot Review*, 35 (2004), pp. 25-28; 'Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot: siblings, spoilt dogs, cream-jugs, torn dresses, farm labourers, the judgment of Solomon and the outward gaze', *The Gaskell Society Newsletter*, no. 55 (Spring 2013), p. 16. I use material from these articles here but in concentrating on *Middlemarch* offer some new emphases of interpretation and judgement.
- 4 Gaskell brought up three daughters and her writing career was impelled by the death of her son.
- 5 See Barbara Hardy, 'The Woman at the Window', *Perspectives on Self and Community: Dorothea's Window*, ed. Patricia Gately, Dennis Leavens & D. Cole Woodcox (Lewiston, Queenston & Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 1997), pp. 1-32. The notes to this essay include references to many discussions of the window scene.
- 6 See *North and South*, ed. Martin Dodsworth and Dorothy Collin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970); *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: OUP, 2008): both editions are based on the second edition, 1855.