Middlemarch
and ‘the Home Epic’

Nicola Trott

1 Richard Gravil – Introduction (7)

2 W. B. Hutchings – How pleasant to meet Mr Fielding: The Narrator as Hero in *Tom Jones* (18)

3 Jayne Lewis – ‘Where then lies the difference?: The (Ante) Postmodernity of *Tristram Shandy* (33)

4 Mary Wedd – *Old Mortality*: Editor and Narrator (54)  
   [not available separately]

5 Frederick Burwick – *Mathilda* – Who Knew Too Much (68)

6 Jane Stabler – ‘Perswasion’ in *Persuasion* (82)

7 Frederick Burwick – *Wuthering Heights* as Bifurcated Novel (101)

8 Richard Gravil – Negotiating *Mary Barton* (126)

9 Alan Shelston – Nell, Alice and Lizzie: Three Sisters amidst the Grotesque (148)

10 Richard Gravil – The Androgyny of *Bleak House* (173)

11 Nicola Trott – *Middlemarch* and ‘the Home Epic’ (198)

12 Gerard Barrett – The Ghost of Doubt: Writing, Speech and Language in *Lord Jim* (233)

13 Michael O’Neill – Liking or Disliking: Woolf, Conrad, Lawrence (249)

Page numbers of the text in this micro-ebook correspond to those in the electronic edition as listed above.
Chapter 11

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The year after George Eliot’s death, W. M. W. Call named *Middlemarch* ‘A provincial epic’. His label was intended to offer mixed praise at best;¹ but it brought together terms that George Eliot herself had used, at the very beginning, and end, of her novel. The first is found in the studiedly unassuming subtitle, announcing *Middlemarch* as ‘A Study of Provincial Life’; the second in the unexpectedly ambitious, and open-ended, ‘Finale’ to the work as a whole:

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve .... It is still the beginning of the home epic – the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.²

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1. W. M. W. Call, ‘George Eliot: Her Life and Writings’, *Westminster Review* (hereafter *WR*) 116/n.s.60 (July 1881), 154–98, 180: ‘a kind of village panorama, “Middlemarch” commands a wider view of the human horizon than any of her previous works’; but ‘the self-unfolding unity of composition is too monotonous to be effective, the construction too colossal for satisfying survey. ... and the general inefficiency of action is so conspicuous, that we are half inclined to interpret it as an intended reflection on the futility and unprofitableness of life.’ Call had close ties with his subject: he met and befriended George Eliot and George Henry Lewes in October 1857, the year of his marriage to Charles Hennell’s widow (née Brabant); was co-author, with Chapman, of ‘The Religion of Positivism’ (*WR*, 1858), and reviewer of the revised 1864 edition of Eliot’s translation of the *Life of Jesus* by Strauss (*WR*, October 1864).

Call’s ‘provincial epic’ seems to have been suggested by George Eliot’s own intriguing and oxymoronic expression:³ ‘home epic’, the form that Middlemarch ascribes to the journey of marriage, itself seeks to marry opposing terms, the epic and the home – and, implicitly, man and wife, the male and female principles.⁴ Rather like marriage in this respect, the oxymoron draws such apparently stable binaries into testing proximity with one another. At this juncture in the novel, the specific marriage in view is that between ‘Fred Vincy and Mary Garth’, who, sympathetic readers are assured, have ‘achieved a solid mutual happiness’. They have also both become authors in a small way – he producing a treatise on farming, she ‘a little book for her boys, called Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch’.⁵ Their works are a source of social comment, for narrator and neighbours alike. Sensing an attempt to cross the sexual divide, Middlemarch is quick to impose more normative patterns of behaviour: Fred’s writing is assumed to be by Mary, on account of the lowliness of its subject-matter (‘turnips and mangel-wurzel’); hers is taken to be his, since ‘he had been to the University, “where the ancients were studied”’ (890). In this way, the narrator tartly observes, ‘there was no need to praise anybody for writing a book, since it was always done by somebody else’ (891).⁶

This question of authorship reveals something of the complexity of George Eliot’s representation of gender relations. Much Victorian thinking on marriage,