MENDING SCIENCE IN *MIDDLEMARCH*

A Thesis by

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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DEDICATION

To my beloved and supportive husband, Jesse
Most scholars agree that George Eliot’s scientific interests informed her novels, especially her 1871 novel, *Middlemarch*. This research attempts to add to that body of scholarship by showing how, through *Middlemarch*, Eliot conducted an experiment demonstrating the consequences of science corrupted by egoism, particularly egoism resulting in gender prejudices. Eliot used her two major characters, Dorothea and Tertius Lydgate, to undermine the male chauvinism that had infiltrated Victorian science: Dorothea defies oppressive dogmas about female intellectual ability and levels the incongruous Darwinian theory of sexual selection, while Lydgate suffers the results of a scientist fallen victim to phallocentric preconceived notions about women. The author’s final stroke—the moral of how Eliot believed science could be mended—comes when formerly-chauvinistic Lydgate voluntarily submits himself to Dorothea’s intellect and views her as an equal.
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CHAPTER ONE
MENDING SCIENCE IN MIDDLEMARCH

In *Middlemarch*, George Eliot wrote: "Science is properly more scrupulous than dogma. Dogma gives a charter to mistake, but the very breath of science is a contest with mistake, and must keep the conscience alive. Alas! The scientific conscience had got into the debasing company of money obligation and selfish respects" (739). For positivists like Eliot, science was a religion: observing the natural laws of the universe revealed intended ethical codes on which all life and society should be organized. Therefore, keeping science free from impure influences, humans' “selfish respects,” was paramount for society's ethical structuring.

As a woman who made her living by writing and who was actively engaged in scientific interests and discussions, Eliot was especially sensitive to the consequences of science corrupted by human egoism. Victorian science—the male-controlled discipline—had been infiltrated and influenced by prejudiced dogmas that supported an unethical social structure and privileged some individuals over others. Consequently, Victorian science was interpreted through dogmatic lenses that did not necessarily represent the true sequences found elsewhere in nature, but instead supported the prejudiced status quo. Most scientists were educated men who occupied the higher tiers of the social power pyramid, and this control allowed them, to large extent, to define how science was interpreted, and by whom. For instance, people groups with less social power—like women or the lower classes—did not typically have access to the quality of education available to middle and upper class men, and were not able to participate in the shaping of
scientific discussions as a result. Their subjectivity was controlled by those educated men who benefitted from promulgating the status quo, and who continued to condone an interpretation of science that kept the social organization structured according to their interests. These selfish interests were often reflected in the prejudiced dogmas around which—“Alas!”—scientific theories were constructed.

One such dogma, which George Eliot knew first-hand to be incorrect, was the opinion that women were not capable of scientific reasoning and thinking on an equal intellectual level with men. In fact, the minds with whom Eliot fellowshipped most frequently—whether in person or through reading their writing—included many of the most intelligent and influential philosophers and scientists of her day: men like Herbert Spencer, John Stuart Mills, Charles Darwin, her husband George Henry Lewes, Auguste Comte and Ludwig Feuerbach. She also earned her living by her pen, an intellectual career which dogmatic Victorian society deemed unfeminine. Eliot, however, believed that not just she but several other women had already proved and continued to demonstrate that literary talent was not solely a masculine attribute: “Fiction,” according to Eliot, “is a department of literature in which women can, after their kind, fully equal men” (“Silly” 203). She also acknowledged the prejudice a female writer faced. “No sooner does a woman show that she has genius or effective talent, then she receives the tribute of being moderately praised and severely criticized,” Eliot stated (202). In many cases, fear drove this reactionary response to women’s work: the masculine-dominated British world desired to restrict subversive messages that might cause other under-privileged readers to become discontented with their lot.
In 1871, Eliot published a novel, *Middlemarch*, which subversively took up some of the scientific ideas that were being used to support a structuring of Victorian society that kept women under male oppression. In *Middlemarch*, which many herald as Eliot’s greatest work, Eliot uses characters like Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate to expose the flaws in science perverted by “selfish respects.” Dorothea defies oppressive dogmas about female intellectual ability and reproductive value, by which men had egoistically manipulated science to keep women in subjection. Lydgate’s didactic role, on the other hand, is ironic: Eliot uses Lydgate, the novel’s would-be scientific reformer, to expose the consequences of a scientist fallen victim to the human ego, particularly emphasizing problems arising from gender prejudices. The author’s final stroke, in *Middlemarch*, of mending science built on prejudiced dogmas comes when Lydgate, whose character desires to participate in reforming science, voluntarily submits himself to Dorothea’s intellect.

Though dogmatically-influenced science espoused women’s incapacity for participating in scientific pursuits, Eliot’s knowledge of contemporary Victorian scientific discourses is easily supported; It is difficult to find a serious piece of criticism on Eliot that does not mention her scientific interests. A great many scholars over the years have contributed to excavating Eliot’s scientific resume, and Gillian Beer, Sally Shuttleworth, Diana Postlethwaite, and Rick Rylance are some of the more recent critics. Their work, among that of others, helps to show how Eliot’s knowledge of advancing scientific and medical ideas including those in the areas of phrenology, philosophy, psychology, biology, and cellular theory inform her novels.

Through her studies, Eliot found herself adhering to the beliefs of organism and positivism, both of which deeply influenced her writing. Organicists viewed all of life as an
interconnected organic whole that functioned like an organism. As an organicist, therefore, Eliot saw society as a “social organism...governed by the operation of the same immutable laws that govern physiological life” (Shuttleworth 5). Postivism, simply put, was the philosophy that science was the highest authority and all truths could be found by observing natural laws. For a positivist like George Combe, whose 1851 *The Constitution of Man* Eliot read, this meant that God represents his “moral government” through “general laws” of nature; by studying these laws, then, people could discern what God intended for the ethical conduct of humans and social policy (x). Many intellectual thinkers were enthralled by the belief that absolute truth could be found through observation of the natural world. Shuttleworth notes that Eliot shared that enthusiasm:

> In her 1851 review of Mackay’s “The Progress of the Intellect”, she communicates the excitement felt by so many of her contemporaries at the recognition ‘of undeviating law in the material and moral world—of that invariability of sequence which is acknowledged to be the basis of physical science, but which is still perversely ignored in our social organization, our ethics and our religion’. (5)

Eliot and other positivists were excited by the implications of the “undeviating” natural laws: they believed that society could be structured ethically and bettered by following these laws. However, Eliot recognized the dissonance between the functions and the laws of the natural world and those of human society.

One of the areas in which humans seemed to have corrupted the laws of the natural world was in their interpretation of female nature. Eliot believed that “science has no sex: the mere knowing and reasoning faculties, if they act correctly, must go through the same process, and arrive at the same result” (“Woman in France,” 31). Yet common Victorian science—represented by egoistic male scientists—promoted the belief that women were physically and mentally inferior to men. In 1851, Herbert Spencer spent one chapter of
Social Statics disputing that presumptions of “the mental inferiority of women” should not “bar...their claim to equal rights with men” (157). Although Spencer acknowledges the many women who had achieved great things in various fields, he qualifies his argument by noting: “the intellect of woman is less profound than that of man” (157-8). Darwin’s 1871 publication of *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* did not help to dispel these misconceptions. Darwin professed that “the chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn by man’s attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands” (564). Of course, Darwin’s claim does not take into account the significant discrepancy between male and female education.

Not all those active in shaping scientific discourses, male or female, supported scientific dogmas about female inferiority. Some argued that man’s apparent superiority was simply a result of his better education. In his work *Mental Affections of Childhood and Youth*, published in 1887, John Langdon Down addresses “the higher education of women,” a “subject of great interest at the present time which is made the topic of addresses from presidential chairs as well as of numerous articles in periodical literature” (88). Down, who received acclaim for his extensive studies of children with mental defects (and for whom “Down Syndrome” is named), argued that “the doctrine which has been promulgated of late...that the higher culture of the faculties of women will make them less capable of becoming ‘mothers of men,’ was “not based on experience...so far as the etiology of feeble-mindedness is concerned” (88-89). Furthermore, he believed the doctrines barring women’s equal education with men were not only “prejudicial,” but dangerous: “If there is one thing more certain than another about the production of idiocy,” claimed Down, “it is
the danger which arises from the culture of only one side of a woman's nature" (89). He advocated that women be educated so as to make them “not only fit to be ‘mothers of men’ but also companions and helpers of men” (89). A fiery response to this type of argument can be found in the work *Body and Mind*, published in 1871 by Dr. Henry Maudsley, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Professor of Medical Jurisprudence at University College in London. Acting as spokesperson for conventional Victorian science, Maudsley contests the notion of equality in the sexes:

> It has been affirmed by some philosophers that there is no essential difference between the mind of a woman and that of a man; and that if a girl were subjected to the same education as a boy, she would resemble him in tastes, feelings, pursuits, and powers. To my mind it would not be one whit more absurd to affirm that the antlers of a stag, the human beard, and the cock's comb, are effects of education; or that, by putting a girl to the same education as a boy, the female generative organs might be transformed into male organs....While woman preserves her sex, she will necessarily be feebler than man, and, having her special bodily and mental characters, will have to a certain extent her own sphere of activity; where she has become thoroughly masculine in nature, or hermaphrodite in mind—when, in fact, she has pretty well divested herself of her sex—then she may take his ground, and do his work; but she will have lost her feminine attractions, and probably also her chief feminine functions. (35)

Maudsley’s claims illustrate phallocentric anxieties about the increasing social unrest regarding gender inequality, and Cynthia Eagle Russet credits such anxieties for the Victorian push toward scientific postulation about the genders.

The social unrest to which Russet refers includes increasing numbers of British citizens crying out against infrastructural institutions that were oppressive to women. After the middle of the century, more and more people began to question unfair laws that privileged men, laws like the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act and the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869, all of which gave men legal recourses unavailable to women (Savage 38).
Formerly, few had questioned the dogmas that had been used to support many of these laws. The belief that woman had her own “sphere of activity,” as Maudsley put it, separate from the public realm inhabited by men, and that her “tastes, feelings, pursuits and powers,” too were unique to the female sex, a belief that had long justified her different (shallow and restricted) education. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first female writers to publically challenge the inadequacy of female education and the limitations of the female sphere, but the push for more rights for women gradually gained additional traction from the work of other women and men throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Ellen Jordan discusses the transformation of female education among the middle-class, in her article “Making Good Wives and Mothers”—a title based on the words of *Contemporary Review* writer Thomas Markby.

Markby’s 1866 article, “The Education of Women,” proclaimed that “‘making good wives and mothers’” was the “‘true end of the education of women’” (Jordan 439). Jordan’s piece explains the increase in institutions providing female education, and the efforts and strategies of activists fighting for this expansion during the nineteenth century. Jordan gives a convincing argument that proponents of the women’s movement, like Josephine Butler and Emily Davies, “found a way to justify their demands by linking them to the domestic ideology’s definition of femininity” through arguing that “intellectual education made women better wives and mothers” (455-6). Both Butler and Davies—only two of many—published statements in favor of an intellectual education for females in the decade leading up to Maudsley’s 1871 response (Jordan 439).

Conventional female education consisted of “feminine accomplishments”—of the sort demonstrated by Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, such as “propriety of speech,”
“musical execution,” and “getting in and out of a carriage”—in short, “all that was demanded in the accomplished female” (Eliot 96). Yet Dorothea, like others who desired that females might “learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it” (29), views the limited female education as “a narrow teaching” (29), a “toy-box history of the world, adapted to young ladies” (86), who were “hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses...that led no whither” (29). Jordan’s claims that “in the 1860s the new women’s movement began to make its presence felt” explains the social tensions that led Maudsley to publish his rebuff of equal education for females. Cynthia Eagle Russett explains:

Scientists responded to this unrest with a detailed and sustained examination of the differences between men and women that justified their differing social roles...These theories were utilized and adapted to explain how and why men and women differed from each other and, often enough, what these differences signified for social policy. (10)

The scientists who responded were all men, and Russett’s argument suggests that these men were attempting to use science to retain social control. This was exactly the kind of egoistic manipulation that Eliot believed corrupted science and kept it from benefitting the social organism.

Eliot observed the ways men were maintaining female subjection by perverting science to promulgate the current (unethical) social policies that reinforced beliefs about female inferiority. Because property laws privileged males and claims like Maudsley’s stigmatized both professional and working women as masculine or androgynous, harming their chances of finding husbands, middle- and upper-class women had few options for survival outside of marriage. Ironically, this view forced many women into marriages resembling prostitution or slavery. John Stuart Mill found many wives to be no more than
the “personal body-servant of a despot” (59), while George Drysdale claimed matrimony was “woman’s only profession” (403). Drysdale, like Eliot, also believed that “enormous evils must result” from a situation in which “the wife is...wholly dependent on the husband” (404). This society-mandated dependence of females on males did not exist elsewhere in nature, and Eliot desired that “undeviating” natural laws should be replicated in social organization (Shuttleworth 5).

Although Eliot’s literary and scientific activities were viewed by many as unconventional, her success as a fiction writer gave her a practical strategy for communicating her social critiques and for attempting to change the problems she saw. In a letter to a friend she wrote, “as a mere fact of zoological evolution, women seem to me to have the worse share in existence. But for that very reason I would the more contend in moral evolution. We have ‘an art that does mend nature’” (Beer 220). Eliot’s art was writing, and through Middlemarch, published in the same year as Darwin’s Descent of Man and Maudsley’s Body and Mind, Elliot attempted to “mend nature” as it had been interpreted through science corrupted by human egoism.

Before examining the text of Middlemarch, it is important to understand the scientific ideologies that Eliot was battling. Victorian scientific theories were continually structured according to social hierarchies that privileged white, “civilized” men. Social and scientific theorists like Alexander Walker, Herbert Spencer, and Charles Darwin promoted the idea that male reproductive “fitness” centered in the mind, while female evolutionary “fitness” centered in the body. In Woman Physiologically Considered, published in 1840, Walker—who ironically believed he “deserved thanks” from women for seeking “to establish the truth” about their nature, and caring “not a straw for the outcry of those of his
own sex whom cant and cowardice lead to oppress her” (vi)—published an argument composed of points intended to prove “that the natural inferiority of intellect in women is compensated by a vast superiority in instinct” (vii). His argument comprises claims such as “the principle acts of woman’s life,” such as “love, impregnation, gestation, parturition, lactation, and nursing” are “almost entirely instinctive” (vii); that woman has “feeblervolition,” less “capability of attention,” and “muscular weakness” due to her smaller brain (viii-ix); that woman has an “incapability of reasoning—generalizing, forming trains of connected ideas, judging” and “persevering” (ix); that woman’s “friendship, her philanthropy, her patriotism and her politics, requiring the exercise of reason, are so feeble as to be worthless” (ix); and that “great mental exertion” is actually “injurious to her” (ix). Three decades later, appearing shortly after Middlemarch, Maudsley published Sex in Mind and Education, which emphasized women’s reproductive role and argues that “strenuous mental pursuits” risk seriously “harming the reproductive function” (5). Conventional Victorian science maintained that there was “sex in mind as distinctly as there [was] sex in body” (Sex 7-8), and females who attempted to attain masculine intellect jeopardized their marital and social duty.

Because Victorians did not yet fully understand the complexity of factors influencing heredity, or the potential of latent genes, their beliefs were fashioned after a “like-produces-like” mentality. For example, popular scientists like George Combe believed that character and personality could be passed from parents to children (179, 183), as could “impressions on the mind of the mother, especially those received through the sense” (176). This concept of direct correlation between the condition of the parent and that of the offspring is shown in the idea that children of older fathers would be weaker than
children of younger fathers (183), as well as in the following examples, found in Combe’s work *The Constitution of Man*:

A man’s first child was of sound mind; afterwards he had a fall from his horse, by which his head was much injured. His next two children proved to be both idiots. After this he was trepanned, and had other children, and they turned out to be of sound mind. (174)

This example illustrates the Victorians’ belief that a parent’s temporal qualities could be permanently inherited by its child. Another example of this belief is illustrated in a lecture delivered in 1866 by John Langdon Down. Down stated:

...it will be seen that I attach immense importance to the emotional life of the mother during the period of pregnancy, and I feel convinced it is one of the most potent of all the pre-efficients of idiocy. In 32% of my cases there was a well-ascertained history of great mental disturbance in the part of the mother at that time. (58)

Both of the preceding examples illustrate the Victorian recognition of nature as an influence on a child’s development, but also show their ignorance about the potential of nurturing influences. Neither Combe nor Down take into account the possibility that the children of handicapped (whether permanently or temporarily, mentally or emotionally) parents imitate their parents’ handicaps because they have learned to do so. In other words, Victorians primarily acknowledged nature as a factor in the development of offspring, but did not consider the potential of nurture in a child’s development. Their blindness to the power of educational molding (intentional or not) helps to explain their confused ideas about female intellect.

The Victorians’ belief that feminine inferiority was hereditary and, therefore, natural is not surprising given their ignorance about the power of nurturing an individual’s intellect: females were typically excluded from the opportunities for mental development available to males. Because so many (uneducated) females demonstrated less-developed
intellectual powers than their male peers, intellectual inferiority was thought to be a feminine attribute. Therefore, overtly intellectual females were regarded as unnatural and unfeminine. Females were credited with specific hereditary contributions, but intellectual power was not among these contributions, according to dogmatic Victorian science.

Although many Victorians did not believe females passed intellectual powers to their children, they did recognize a correlation between the physical condition of the mother and that of the child she carried and delivered. This seeming correlation led them to assume that females contributed physical traits to their offspring. Jennifer Panek—whose study of *Adam Bede* explores the way Eliot problematizes definitions of masculine sexual attractiveness based on intellectual ability—shows how the theory of human sexual selection (supported by men like Walker, Spencer and Darwin) influenced the Victorian marriage market. Panek succinctly summarizes the gender economy that valued women’s “beauty” and men’s “genius,” stating: “the natural order decreed that woman’s contribution to the improvement of the race was a fine physique, and man’s a highly developed intellect” (128). Interestingly, these associations of woman with body and man with mind helped reinforce beliefs that women were inferior. Rick Rylance explains that, for Victorians, “the faculties are arranged hierarchically with the so-called ‘higher faculties’, such as reason, faith, love, spiritual apprehension, a sense of the numinous, exercise of the will, and so on, at the top,” while “the ‘lower faculties’, such as sensation, feeling, appetite, desire, and so on” were arranged “at the bottom” (27). “Clearly,” Rylance observes, “this implies a mind-body separation” (127). Rylance’s contention also reflects and supports Darwin’s view in *The Descent of Man* that masculine reproductive power centers in males’ “inventive genius” (557), and that males have been more evolutionarily modified than females (560).
Females, on the other hand, according to Darwin, demonstrate lesser powers, like “the powers of intuition” and “of rapid perception” which Darwin believes to be “owing to [their] maternal instincts” and “characteristic of the lower races, and therefore of a past and lower state of civilization” or “development” (563-564). Clearly, therefore, both the Victorians’ belief in the hierarchy of faculties and Darwin’s distinction between the higher faculties of males and the lower faculties of females worked to brace the society’s gendered power structure.

Eliot recreates a social environment in Middlemarch that mirrors the one in which she lives, replete with all its problematic dogmas about female nature and intellectual ability. Socially powerful characters like Mr. Brooke, Mr. Casaubon, and Mr. Chettham represent conventional Victorian beliefs about female intellect. Mr. Brooke continually comments on the “lightness” of “the feminine mind,” telling Dorothea that her “sex are not thinkers” (65), and that “young ladies are too flighty” to understand “such deep studies” as “political economy” (20, 17), “classics, mathematics,” and “that kind of thing,” which “are too taxing for a woman” (65). Mr. Casaubon believes a wife should imitate “an elegant-minded canary-bird” (200), and that Dorothea “was a personification of that shallow world which surrounds the ill-appreciated or desponding author” (201). In a moment of heated anger, Casaubon bursts out that Dorothea is one of the “chatterers who attempt only the smallest achievements, being...equipped for no other” (201). Mr. Chettham is ostensibly charmed by Dorothea’s intellect, but only because he is confident that “even his ignorance is of a sounder quality” than her intelligence (21). The beliefs of all three of these male characters are supportable by scientific theories contemporary to
Eliot’s writing career. Male scientists created these theories, and they were used to justify policies that privileged men with social and intellectual power.

In keeping with Russett’s argument that Victorian scientists were responding to social unrest in developing their theories about biological gender differences, it is interesting to observe that just as Maudsley cites proponents of female education as his reason for publishing *Sex in Mind and Education*, Mr. Brooke, Casaubon and Chettham only make their comments and form their opinions after Dorothea has demonstrated “tastes, feelings, pursuits, [or] powers” that “resemble” their own (Maudsley 35). Mr. Brooke’s first insistence on the incompetency of female intellect follows Dorothea’s suggestion that she could better organize her uncle’s documents (Eliot 20); Casaubon’s after he (mistakenly) perceives Dorothea to be criticizing his work as a scholar (200); and Mr. Chettham’s as reassurance that even if Dorothea chooses to participate in his pastimes of horseback riding or “the pleasures of hunting” (18), or if she became his wife and he were to ask her for advice, he had “always the advantage of being masculine” (21).

In creating Dorothea, Eliot combats Victorian ideas about human sexual selection by decentering her heroine’s worth from her body or her reproductive role and placing it instead in her mind. The narrator consistently emphasizes Dorothea’s intellectual makeup throughout the text. She is “remarkably clever” (7); “her mind was theoretic” (8); and she has “an active conscience and a great mental need” (28). While the text calls attention to Dorothea’s mind, it also presents a young woman who does not want to be valued for her body. Although Dorothea is frequently described as having “good looks” (8), and being “a girl so handsome” that “nothing could hinder” her worth on the marriage market (9), she chooses to downplay her body and instead accentuate her mind. She wears “plain
garments” (7), frequently appears “clad in Quakerish grey drapery” (189), and does not share her more conventionally feminine sister’s affinity for jewelry or outward adornment (11). She also literally calls attention to her head in her choice of hairstyle:

She would perhaps be hardly characterized enough if it were omitted that she wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner at a time when public feeling required the meagerness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls and bows. (27)

Eliot’s interest in phrenology likely influenced her creation of the preceding passage; phrenologists focused on the shape and form of the head based on the fact that it housed the brain, which was believed to be “the organ of the mind” (Postlethwaite 104). Thus, a phrenologist could more easily see the mind represented through Dorothea’s choice of coif.

Furthering the disassociation between Dorothea and her pro-generative role is the fact that after Casaubon proposes, not only does she not think about “the niceties of the trousseau”—clothes to adorn her body—but she also neglects considering “the honours and sweet joys of the blooming matron” (Eliot 28). In fact, she desires to marry Casaubon because she believes he will “deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance, and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest paths” and teach her “to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by” (29). In other words, Dorothea believes her husband will value and commune with her intellectually, rather than restricting her worth to the physical realm. However, Casaubon, like those proponents of gender-biased scientific theory, does not share Dorothea’s progressive vision for the female role within society or within a marriage. Casaubon adheres to ideas presented in respected scientific works like Maudsley’s *Body and Mind* and Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, both of which were published in the same year as *Middlemarch*. 
Eliot’s constant scientific activities kept her abreast of the major debates developing around her, so the observation that *Middlemarch* seems to engage some of the dogmatically phallocentric arguments presented in Darwin’s or Maudsley’s contemporaneous works is likely accurate. Despite Eliot’s lack of formal scientific or medical training, Rick Rylance explains why the author’s voice could still creditably influence those scientific discussions her work sought to engage. Rylance, an expert on Victorian psychology and Victorian British culture, states that “the generalist nature of Victorian intellectual culture” allowed “continuing intellectual conversation between specialists and generalists, scientists and literary writers, theologians, doctors, and philosophers” and that published “ideas are cultivated public utterances designed to defend positions, refute alternatives, and persuade other readers” (1). Considering all the evidence of Eliot’s interest in and tendency toward scientific discourse, and the fact that she expressly desired to use “art” to “mend nature,” helping to shape contemporary scientific discussions was clearly a primary intention for *Middlemarch*.

Eliot viewed her contribution to the formation of contemporary scientific dialogues like any good scientist would: she was not simply writing—she was conducting experiments through her literature. A mid-twentieth century scholar, Patrick McCarthy—building on the work of Gordon Haight, Anna Kitchel, and Asa Briggs—writes that “under the influence of Comte, Feuerbach, and Strauss [Eliot] accepted the scientific method as a test and validation of all truth” (810). McCarthy writes, “George Eliot tells us herself” that “the design for *Middlemarch*” was “to show ‘the gradual action of causes in some direction [other than] the beaten path’” (809). Sally Shuttleworth, too, argues that in *Middlemarch* Eliot conducted an “experiment in time” (142). According to Shuttleworth, Eliot intends to
show that “individual identity is not only influenced by the larger social organism, it is actively defined by it” (143). While I agree with Shuttleworth’s identification of organicism as a major theme in Middlemarch, I would argue that Eliot’s experiment in this novel is actually meant to achieve the opposite: I believe Eliot intends to show how an individual life can influence the larger social organism for the better; how the actions of a female character, who dares to live outside the role Victorian science has prescribed for her—as Eliot did—can influence, change, and help to redefine the larger social organism.

Eliot herself confesses in an 1876 letter to her publisher John Blackwood that her “writing is simply a set of experiments in life” (Postlethwaite 103), and she begins the Prelude to Middlemarch by writing, “Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa” (Eliot 3). The Prelude foretells her novel’s microscopic view of the social specimen: she has trained her microscope on the entire social organism of human history, but then zooms in to focus on one female, whose “passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life” (3).

Though Eliot laments in her prelude that “many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action” (3), her intention for the experiment of Middlemarch is to show how society can be improved, if even a little, by a female who defies the prejudiced dogmas that had infiltrated science. Eliot believed that “true science could be arrived at” only “when ‘preconceived notions’ were silenced” (Postlethwaite 108), and she admired nature for its “invariability of sequence” which she believed was “still perversely ignored” in Victorian “social organization” (Shuttleworth 5). In other words, Eliot attempted to construct a true
scientific experiment by exploring what might happen if a woman dared to live in such a
game that silenced preconceived notions about her gender. She believed true science was
gender-blind, having boldly claimed that “science has no sex” (“Woman” 31), and she
wanted to use Middlemarch to show how science could be mended in a way that human
social organization could be more ethically governed by natural laws.

One of the scientific theories that Eliot challenges and attempts to mend in
Middlemarch is that of human sexual selection. Although Darwin’s publication of Descent of
Man, which presented the theory of human sexual selection, appeared in the same year as
Middlemarch, “Darwin was hardly the first nineteenth-century thinker to advance opinions
about what made certain specimens of each sex more biologically ‘fit’ and consequently
more sexually attractive than others,” as Jennifer Panek points out (127). However,
Darwin’s reputation as a scholar—thanks to the widespread acclaim garnered by Origin of
Species—gave extra significance to the theory of human sexual selection, which supported
prejudiced social policies privileging men as intellectually superior and relegating women
to physical capacities. Since the body relies on and is controlled by the mind, Darwin’s
evolutionary valuation of the genders would prove dangerously beneficial in scientifically
supporting the continuation of dogmas that Eliot and others found oppressive, egoistic and
unethical.

For Darwin, sexual selection was “the advantage which certain individuals have over
others of the same sex and species solely in respect of reproduction” (Descent, 209) and he
attributed the power of sexual selection to the female in every species except one: humans.
For other species, “there is a struggle between the males for the possession of the
female....Hence the females have the opportunity of selecting one out of several males” with
whom to reproduce. The males who “cannot pair”—and for Darwin’s purposes, pairing meant copulating for reproductive purposes—“will be the weaker or less attractive individuals” (216).

Though Darwin confidently credited the females of every other species as possessing the power of sexual selection, he was less clear about which gender held that power among humans. For example, he states, “in civilized life man is largely, but by no means exclusively, influenced in the choice of his wife by external appearances” (573). He later adds that “civilized men are largely attracted by the mental charms of women, by their wealth, and especially by their social position” (585), but also notes that women of “civilized nations” who have “free or almost free choice” in husbands are likewise attracted to the “social position and wealth of the men” (586). Clearly, Darwin is ambivalent about which gender holds the power of sexual selection for humanity; his uncertainty could have been—as Lydgate’s proves to be—a conflict between his loyalty to true science and his egoistic loyalty to the society from whose prejudiced conventions he benefitted as a socially powerful male. David Hull points out that “socio-economic factors” of Darwin’s “competitive, individualistic, dog-eat-dog society” largely influenced both the development and acceptance of Darwin’s theories. Karl von Baer believed Darwin’s theory “was popular not because of its scientific merits but because it was in full harmony with the materialist bent of modern ideologues” (Hull 138). Regardless of Darwin’s intentions in not extending to human females the sequence of female sexual selection observed in the rest of nature, the implications of declaring the invariability of this natural sequence—which would essentially place reproductive power for determining the traits and continuity of society in
the hands of women—would have undermined the current organization of society and gendered power structure.

George Eliot realized the significance, for women, of the hiccup in Darwin’s theory of sexual selection and aimed her *Middlemarch* experiments at mending this broken link in an otherwise sequential chain. Gillian Beer, whose studies on intersections between Darwinian theory and the plots of Victorian writers like Eliot and Hardy inform much recent scholarship dealing with science in *Middlemarch*, observes that both Eliot and Hardy used Darwin’s emphasis on “the egalitarian potential of succession within the natural order” in their novels. Beer also poses the question of whether fiction can “restore to the female the power of selection which, Darwin held, men had taken over” and whether the “woman writing” can “shape new future stories” (218). Beer’s questions are important, but her answer to at least the first question does not take into consideration the entirety of the Dorothea Brooke-Casaubon-Ladislaw story. Beer believes that Eliot combats the patriarchal bent of Darwin’s theory of human sexual selection by “absolve[ing]” her “women in unhappy marriages...from taking part in the pattern of descent” (224).

However, this is not, at least uniformly, true of Eliot’s novels: Dorothea does take part in a pattern of descent—she has a little boy with Will Ladislaw by the end of *Middlemarch* (836). This being said, I believe Eliot’s plot did restore the power of female sexual selection exactly as Darwin claimed it occurred in the rest of nature.

What Beer has missed in the plot of this particular novel is the product of Eliot’s experiment: her heroine, who defies Victorian scientific gender conventions, is able to reclaim the power of sexual selection and in so doing to produce offspring with a male who also disregards the “preconceived notions” or prejudiced dogmas that had long diseased
the social organism and kept women in subjection. Dorothea does not have children with Casaubon, a man who, as has been demonstrated, believes that females are intellectually inferior. Further significance in Casaubon’s unfruitful union with Dorothea can be found in Esther Godfrey’s postulation that depictions of older husbands in nineteenth-century British literature were often meant to represent the “privileges of a patriarchal social order,” and that these characters “often found their power hyperbolized through their age” (18). Godfrey presents a convincing argument, and Casaubon’s social status in the novel certainly postures him as a very privileged member of the patriarchal society in which he lived. His age, too, makes him a father figure, or patriarch, to Dorothea, and she even compares their relationship to that between father and daughter (63).

We already know that Casaubon subscribes to prejudiced beliefs about female nature, and readers will find that Casaubon demonstrates despotism toward any socially inferior person who challenges his authority. Victorians believed that character and personality could be passed on to offspring, so any children of Casaubon’s would risk inheriting his egocentric “preconceived notions.” The only way to keep Casaubon, and men like him, from continuing to create prejudiced offspring is to keep their offspring “preconceived.”

Refusing to procreate with men adhering to prejudiced dogmas would, according to Victorian ideas about heredity, slowly decrease the number of citizens promoting these prejudiced ideas; and— if every woman were to follow Dorothea’s lead—England could be repopulated with non-prejudiced offspring. In The Constitution of Man, George Combe proposes the idea of selective breeding for the purpose of increasing the ethics of the English race:
According to this rule, the children of the individuals who have obeyed the organic, moral, and the intellectual laws, will not only start from the highest level of their parents in acquired knowledge, but will inherit an enlarged development of the moral and intellectual organs, and thereby enjoy an increasing capability of discovering and obeying the institutions of the Creator. (190)

Thus, if more women acted as Dorothea and chose to marry and reproduce with unprejudiced husbands, even if it meant “giv[ing] up position and fortune to marry” a man less socially powerful (Eliot 835), then Eliot’s claims about “an art that does mend nature” might come true. The alternative would be to continue to promulgate the patriarchal society with all its problems, by creating egocentric offspring with men like Casaubon.

As the patriarchal older husband, Casaubon follows Darwin’s theory of human sexual selection in his choice of Dorothea as wife. Casaubon believes that “a man of good position should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because the more educable and submissive,” and “he should receive family pleasures and leave behind him that copy of himself which seemed so urgently required of a man” (278). Evidently, Casaubon—in thinking according to conventional patterns—is thinking primarily of his own interests; and this type of egotistical, phallocentric ideology, upon which conventional Victorian society was structured, was exactly what Eliot sought to change.

Further evidence that Casaubon makes his selection based on the corrupt theory of human sexual selection is the fact that in proposing to Dorothea, he uses evolutionary language. After becoming conscious “of need” in his life, he tells her: “For in the first hour of meeting you, I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need...and each succeeding opportunity for observation has given the impression an added depth by convincing me more emphatically of that fitness which I had preconceived”
(my emphasis, 43). Although Casaubon acknowledges that Dorothea seems suited to help him with his scholarship (43-44), the work he wants from her is centered in her body. He will supply the intellect; she will supply the manual labor. Casaubon confesses upon first meeting Dorothea that he “want[s] a reader for [his] evenings” because he has “been using up [his] eyesight on old characters” (17). Casaubon seems interested in Dorothea for what she can bring to him as a secretary (20, 279), rather than as an independent thinker. One should remember that according to conventional Victorian scientists like Maudsley or Walker, women were incapable “of reasoning—generalizing, forming trains of connected ideas” or “judging.” Therefore, Casaubon—whose aged body is growing weak—will do the thinking and rely on Dorothea to supply the physical aspects for him. This conventional assumption of gender roles that centered masculinity in the intellect and femininity in the body is exemplified in the first assignment Casaubon gives Dorothea. While still on their honeymoon, Casaubon says, “the notes I have here made will want sifting, and you can, if you please, extract them under my direction” (199). Casaubon continues to expect Dorothea to fulfill physical roles: copying—which does not require understanding of content—reading aloud to him, and providing the body that will produce his eventual offspring.

Although Dorothea desires to be valued for her mind, Casaubon demonstrates anxiety when she expresses too much intellectual hunger. When she asks whether she could “learn to read Latin and Greek aloud” to Casaubon “as Milton’s daughters did to their father” (63), Casaubon replies, “I fear that would be wearisome to you…and indeed, if I remember rightly, the young women you have mentioned regarded that exercise in unknown tongues as a ground for rebellion against the poet” (64). Knowledge is power
that must be jealously guarded. So when Dorothea requests to “enter a little more into what interests” her husband (199), he rejects her request for mental involvement, wishing she would “instead [observe] his abundant pen scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird” (200). Nonetheless, Dorothea will not be caged. She demonstrates discontent with her limited socially-prescribed role; and like the “many Theresas”—and George Eliot herself—desires to live in a world where “science has no sex” and preconceived notions” are silenced. This is the experiment of Middlemarch, to see if such conditions might be achievable, and if so, how?

Eliot wants to know what will happen if the theory of sexual selection is made uniform across all species: she wants to see what will happen if human egoism exits and the power of sexual selection is restored to the human female. She constructs her experiment in part through her depiction of Casaubon, who represents conventional Victorian beliefs about the genders. According to Darwin, men have the power to select their mates and to decide which women are enabled to reproduce and pass on their traits to offspring. For her character Dorothea and the males who wish to reproduce with her, Eliot mends this flaw in Darwin’s theory by recreating a power dynamic that replicates the otherwise uniform natural law of sexual selection.

The flaw in Darwin’s theory of human sexual selection originates in egoistic, phallocentric thinking: the males of every other species had the role of performing in order to impress and win the female’s favor. Obviously, this meant that the male had to subject himself to the deciding female. In Middlemarch, Eliot hints at the flaw in the theory Casaubon is following by mocking his attempt to wield the power of sexual selection; Casaubon—like any man who credits the dogmatically-corrupted theory—believes he
wields the power of sexual selection. However, Eliot undermines his power by depicting him much like any other male animal performing “strange antics” (Darwin 211). After Dorothea accepts his proposal, Casaubon gives a speech which the narrator describes as “sincere as the bark of a dog, or the cawing of an amorous rook” (50). Shortly after, the narrator draws attention to the flaw in Darwin’s interpretation of human sexual selection, criticizing Dorothea for “not in the least teaching Mr. Casaubon to ask if he were good enough for her, but merely asking herself anxiously how she could be good enough for Mr. Casaubon” (51). In every other species, the male tries to win the female by subjecting himself to her; in Dorothea and Casaubon’s courtship, they follow the flawed theory of human sexual selection in which the male had seized the power from the female, expecting her to subject herself to him. Eliot’s disastrous portrayal of the Casaubons’ marriage discredits Darwin’s flawed theory, and her eventual demonstration of a courtship following the theory as it occurs in the rest of nature (Dorothea’s and Will’s) shows how the scientific theory could be successfully mended to better society.

Eliot further criticizes Darwin’s flawed theory by showing through Casaubon’s character that the most socially powerful males—those who had gained power by the egoistic, individualistic social organization at the time Eliot was writing—were not always the most reproductively powerful. As an upper-class wealthy white male, Casaubon occupied a higher tier on the social power structure than most of the other characters in Middlemarch. Darwin states in The Descent of Man that “man is more powerful in body and mind than woman...therefore it is not surprising that he should have gained the power of selection” (597). Yet, Casaubon’s anxiety about his mental abilities undermines his fitness according to Darwin’s own theory of sexual selection; the narrator informs that “Casaubon
was nervously conscious that he was expected to manifest a powerful mind” (279), yet he “had not yet succeeded in issuing copies of his mythological keys” (278). Eliot exposes the problems that ensue in a marriage in which the husband has sole power of selecting the wife, based on her reproductive fitness, especially when that wife is highly intelligent. Casaubon discovers too late that perhaps the theory of human sexual selection is faulty: “society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualification for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy” (279). Appropriately, Casaubon blames society, not science, for the error in the model of sexual selection. Social “dogma [gave] a charter to mistake,” in this case, while “the very breath of science is a contest with mistake,” according to Eliot. The argument woven into the text here is that if society would abandon its preconceived notions and egoistically phallocentric organization, following instead the natural model of sexual selection, marriages would be more successful.

Like other proponents of the women’s movement, discussed in articles like Ellen Jordan’s “Making Good Wives and Mothers,” Eliot uses the very belief system to which Victorian society subscribed to undermine that system by exposing its flaws. According to Darwin, the males in other species who “cannot pair...will be the weaker or less attractive individuals” (216). Thus, Eliot seems to mock Casaubon by criticizing the society that bestows such men with social power and by suggesting that he is impotent and consequently an evolutionary weakling. Not only does Eliot paint Casaubon as a mentally inferior specimen, but many characters in the novel find him physically repellant as well. For example, Dorothea’s sister, Celia, comments on “how very ugly Mr. Casaubon is” (20), and Sir James Chettham finds his “want of muscular curve” to be “morally painful” (278).
Casaubon has social power, but lacks the mental and physical strength Darwin attributed to socially powerful males. Not surprisingly, given the evidence, readers later learn that it is not Dorothea who causes the marriage to be a barren one; she reproduces with Will Ladislaw. Therefore, it is the egotistical male who believes in and relies on the unnatural concept of human sexual selection that does not survive in the struggle for succession.

Several scholars have commented on the frequency of the love triangle between older husband, younger wife, and younger suitor in novels that include the intergenerational marriage theme. Esther Godfrey shows how various younger suitors, Sir James Chettham and Will Ladislaw in the case of Middlemarch, serve to form “a composite ideal of what the husband is not” (7). Godfrey differentiates between Chettham and Ladislaw by pointing out that Chettham is cast as “a more idealized image of manhood” (104); whereas “Will further contrasts Casaubon’s aging body” (105). While I agree with Godfrey’s assessment of the two young suitors in their relation to Casaubon and his deficiencies, I think it is important—in considering Darwin’s theory of human sexual selection—to distinguish between Will and Chettham as well as between Will and Casaubon. Where my argument is concerned, Chettham and Casaubon are more closely related than Will and Chettham, due to the fact that both Chettham and Casaubon espouse the prejudiced ideas about female ability that so irritated Eliot. Although Chettham encourages Dorothea’s architectural plans, and in courting her “was ready to endure a great deal of predominance, which, after all, a man could always put down when he liked,” Chettham consoles himself in the assumption that “a man’s mind—what there is of it—has always the advantage of being masculine—as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm—and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality” (21).
Consequently, by Eliot’s design, neither Chettham nor Casaubon is the right person to reproduce with Dorothea. In contrast, Will Ladislaw does win the opportunity to reproduce with Dorothea. He is not as socially powerful as either Chettham or Casaubon, but the fact that Will is most adept in “charming the female” works in his evolutionary favor.

In his chapter on sexual selection as demonstrated through the courtship of birds, Darwin observes: “it is the object of the male to induce the female to pair with him, and for this purpose he tries to excite or charm her in various ways” (404). Eliot’s positivist beliefs require that human courtship should naturally follow this model of sexual selection. Therefore, although Casaubon may be the more socially powerful suitor, Dorothea does not find his oppressive ideas about gender distinction impressive or charming. Will, who demonstrates to Dorothea that he does not agree with the unethical and prejudiced aspects of society that keep women in subjection is a far more exciting and charming suitor. While Casaubon egocentrically neglects considering what he can do to make Dorothea happy, Will tells Dorothea, “I wish I could ever do anything that would be what you call kind—that I could ever be of the slightest service to you” (223-4). Will’s language shows his altruism—the exalted opposite of egoism. Thus, not only does Will prove to have more charming ideas regarding Dorothea’s gender, but he also does not demonstrate the individualistic selfishness that Eliot believed to be the root of society’s ills.

Will’s personality and character, as demonstrated through his rejection of oppressive conventional beliefs, would incite any female desiring more equal treatment to pair with him. When Casaubon introduces Dorothea to Will, Casaubon describes him [Will] as being not “submissive to ordinary rule” (81), as exampled by his aversion to gaining a
traditional education at a university (where he would likely be indoctrinated into the sorts of beliefs held by men like Maudsley). Will also does not objectify women as mere bodies to be admired by the male gaze. When his friend Naumann wants to paint Dorothea, Will objects on the grounds that “English ladies are not at everybody's service as models” (191). He also realizes that “ordinary phrases which might apply to mere bodily prettiness were not applicable to [Dorothea]” (217). Not only does Will de-center Dorothea’s worth from her body, but he encourages her mental pursuits. While Casaubon would often “inform her that she was mistaken, and reassert what her remark had questioned” during conversations (361), a process that causes her to feel mentally inferior, Will “occasionally...appealed to Dorothea, and discussed what she said, as if her sentiment were an item to be considered in the final judgment even of the Madonna di Foligno or the Laocoon” (213). Dorothea “had never found much room in other minds for what she cared to say” (361), but she delights in conversing with Will, who “always seemed to see more in what she said than she herself saw” (361). Consequently, Will’s acknowledgement of Dorothea’s intellect and her interests and his desire to not only keep others from objectifying her but to subject himself to her needs are far more attractive qualities than the egocentric ones displayed by men like Casaubon.

Will’s heritage is also intriguing in that he is the product of a line of unconventional women: both his grandmother and his mother had defied societal conventions in their choices of lifestyle. His paternal grandmother had seized the power of sexual selection and married a Polish man of the lower class against her father’s wishes. She had been disinherited as a result, a punishment which Will finds “abominable” (365). Will’s mother, likewise, had run away from her family to earn her living as an actress (366). Thus, while
social organization mandated women’s subjection to and dependence on men, both Will’s grandmother and his mother chose to defy social conventions and live independently of the influences and restrictions of those conventions. Will exults in being a product of “rebellious blood on both sides” (366), and he, too, chooses to discontinue his dependence on and subjection to the socially powerful Casaubon, deciding instead to earn a living to support himself. Dorothea’s uncle, Mr. Brooke, observes that Will has “enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, and emancipation” as well as a gift for “the political situation” (359), suggesting that Will has the potential to bring about changes in the society he has observed to be so often oppressive, egoistic and anachronistic (220, 222). Indeed, by the novel’s end, Will has been returned to Parliament as “an ardent public man,” and the narrator relates that “Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help” (836). Therefore, not only do Will and Dorothea choose to live independently of problematic social conventions, but they dedicate their life together to working to fix the wrongs of these conventions.

Dorothea initially subjected herself to Casaubon and Darwin’s flawed theory of human sexual selection because she believed Casaubon would raise her to his intellectual level. But Dorothea begins to realize the despotic nature of her husband, and the severe intellectual limitations and implications of living in a marriage constructed on a flawed Darwinian theory. Because this is an experiment, and Eliot is in control, she is able to maneuver Dorothea out of her situation by killing Casaubon off—having shown the problems with such a marriage—and presenting Dorothea with a courtship with Will that mirrors the theory of sexual selection as it applies to the rest of nature.
Additionally, Eliot has undermined the perverse social organization based on flawed scientific theories by exposing what can occur when preconceived notions are silenced. She shows how human females could take back the power of sexual selection by refusing to procreate with socially powerful males who promote the despotic structures that keep women in subjection. Although the text is not clear about whether Dorothea acquiesced to Casaubon’s sexual advances (there is debate over the nature of their sexual relationship, as presented by the text), the fact that Eliot chose not to fulfill Casaubon’s desire to “leave behind him that copy of himself” presents readers with one solution for eradicating oppressive dogmas from society: stop passing those prejudiced beliefs on to future generations. Furthermore, Eliot symbolically restores Dorothea’s power of sexual selection within her relationship with Casaubon: after her heroine realizes the nature of the man she has married, she chooses to abort his *Key to All Mythologies*, his intellectual copy of himself. Casaubon wants her to finish and posthumously publish his work, and although she “could understand well enough—why her husband had come to cling to her, as possibly the only hope left that his labours would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world” (479), she symbolically exercises her power of sexual selection and denies existence to his “*embryos of truth*” (my emphasis, 478). Instead, she grants Will Ladislaw the right to reproduce, because his non-oppressive, non-egocentric ideologies and efforts will pass to their offspring and better the social organism that is British society.

Eliot’s critique of flawed science in *Middlemarch* does not end with her restoration of sexual selection to her female protagonist, however. She continues, through her character Tertius Lydgate, to expose the opposition between science and the prejudiced dogmas produced from man’s egoistic impulses to retain social power. Whereas Eliot used
Dorothea’s plot to exhibit how the actions of a single individual might positively change society, she uses Lydgate’s plot to show how an ambitious, well-meaning young scientist’s aspirations of also improving society can be derailed by egoism and adherence to phallocentric dogmas.

A journal she kept sporadically during the conception and construction of her greatest novel shows that Eliot initially planned for Lydgate to be the “hero” of *Middlemarch* (Harris 138), and the story of “Miss Brooke” comprised a project started separately, many months later (142). Obviously, Eliot decided to merge the two plots, and though her journal entries become sparse during the time in which this novel was being composed, two things are clear: Eliot was once again conscious of the conflict between the self and the social good (a frequent theme in her writing); and she deeply desired to communicate messages to her readers that would produce “influence for good on individual minds” (Harris 143). Her journal also reveals that the day before she wrote the introduction to *Middlemarch* she was engaged in a debate with several friends concerning John Stuart Mills’ recent activities to promote women’s suffrage (136).

Accordingly, *Middlemarch* combines two of Eliot’s passions: her knowledge about scientific subjects and processes and her desire to better the lives of others (especially women) and influence the positive evolution of the social organism. She does this in part through her character Tertius Lydgate, would-be medical reformer and scientific discoverer. Her portrayal of Lydgate critiques science influenced by social ambition and egoism, portraying consequences that support her beliefs that true science—the kind that betters society—cannot coexist with preconceived notions and egotistical impulses.
Eliot signals her intentions for Lydgate’s character when she first introduces him: ironically, when Lydgate is first introduced at the dinner party celebrating Dorothea and Casaubon’s upcoming nuptials, the townsmen are talking about women (89), and the townswomen are discussing science and medicine (91). Readers wonder whether Lydgate, the “new young surgeon” will be as “wonderfully clever” about perceiving the true nature of women as he is about diagnosing and treating difficult medical conditions, especially when they see him in “a very animated conversation” with Miss Brooke (91). However, the reader will not have long to discover that though Lydgate is intellectually ahead of the average man in some areas of science, he has “spots of commonness” where his valuation of women and social status are concerned (150).

Lydgate believes himself to be a true man of science, above the prejudices and “social truckling” that “harness” so many of his scientific peers (145, 174). He has selected his profession because he had “the conviction that the medical profession...was the finest in the world...offering the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good” (145). He, like Eliot, also desires to want to mend science: he realizes that science “wanted reform,” and he too believes that his abilities should be judged based on “the independent value of his work” rather than on social advantages he may or may not have (145). Yet contrary to the views of his author, Lydgate’s desire for scientific reform is compartmentalized: he believes social conventions should not limit scientists (who are all male) from making significant contributions to science and thus to society. Whereas Eliot’s views are all-inclusive—she believes “science has no sex” and that every person, regardless of gender, should be credited for the intellect they demonstrate—many of Lydgate’s views reflect the phallocentric dogmas that Eliot wishes to eradicate from science.
Despite this major difference between Eliot and *Middlemarch*’s young surgeon, the two do share similar beliefs about organicism. As a student of Bichat, Lydgate views the human body as an interconnected entity. He believes the human organism cannot “be understood by studying [the organs] first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of primary webs or tissues” (148). For Organicists, the human body is symbolic of society as a whole; they viewed society also as interconnected, with each part, regardless of class or gender, influencing and shaping every other. Eliot’s organicist beliefs are evident in the following lengthy *Middlemarch* passage:

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended up living by an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps some found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rock firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder. Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection—gradually as the old stocking gave way to the savings-bank, and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct, while squires and baronets, and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind, gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship. Settlers, too, came from distant countries, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage of cunning. In fact, much the same sort of movement and mixture went on in Old England as we find in older Herodutus, who also, in telling what had been, thought it well to take a woman’s lot for his starting point. (95-96)

Besides presenting Eliot’s organicist ideas about the interconnectedness of the social organism, the preceding passage also focuses on the potential of “a woman’s lot” as the “starting-point” for societal change and “subtle movement.”

Unfortunately, although Lydgate expresses positivist desires, he does not initially recognize the value and potential in woman’s lot. Lydgate “longed to demonstrate the
more intimate relations of living structure and help to define men’s thought more accurately after the true order” (149); and although he intends to “do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world,” his higher aspirations are thwarted by “spots of commonness” that “lay in the complexion of his prejudices” (148-150). The narrator identifies these “spots of commonness” as “such as were found in ordinary men of the world,” and specifies that these prejudices relate to “his feeling and judgment about...women, or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons” (150).

The remark about his prejudice toward women will be demonstrated shortly, but Lydgate’s desire to be perceived as “better born than other country surgeons” requires some exposition. Lillian Furst helps to address this particularity in her article “Struggling for Medical Reform in Middlemarch.” Furst explains that during the time the novel is set the medical profession was “strongly hierarchical” and traditionally tripartite, with division between physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries (343). At the top of the socio-medical pyramid was the physician, whose “prestige...mandated that he use his head, not his hands,” like a surgeon, and “that he advise rather than do” (343). Physicians “were expected to be well-bred gentlemen with polished manners and classical education,” and Furst relates: “an adequate knowledge of medicine was secondary to such qualities as social standing and moral principles” (343). Lydgate, as a surgeon, occupied “the most problematic category...poised precariously...midway between the physicians and the apothecaries” (343), and was seen as a threat to both “for trespassing on their turf and subverting the accepted order of the profession” (345). Furst emphasizes that “it is important to grasp that Lydgate in his work in Middlemarch is transgressing the accredited
professional structure that still held sway. He is avant-garde in his defiance of rigid compartmentalization as in his recourse to new instruments and treatments” (345). We see this class tension among the various medical practitioners in the novel, and Lydgate seems to enjoy stirring the pot by transcending the traditional socio-medical boundaries. He informs Mr. Bullstrode, “I acknowledge a good deal of pleasure in fighting, and I should not care for my profession, if I did not believe that better methods were to be found and enforced there as well as everywhere else” (125). Lydgate, like Will Ladislaw, has strong desires for reforming the problems he sees in society.

Lydgate’s character—like so many other scientists of Eliot’s day—is ironically incongruous, however. He is blind to the fact that he is part of the problem. He attempts to defy the social hierarchy of his profession by condemning scientists who gain prestige through manipulating the social system rather than through the value of the work they do for society. Yet he simultaneously, if unconsciously, demonstrates prejudices that work to affect his own social standing. Lydgate is blind to the parallels between his experience and his desires and those of Dorothea; both are limited by their society-mandated spheres of ability: Dorothea because she is not a man, and Lydgate because he is not a physician. However, unlike Dorothea’s, Lydgate’ limitations are partially voluntary: despite being born into an upper-class family, Lydgate chose to become a surgeon, and a country surgeon, at that. Yet despite his ostensible rejection of social posturing, he still desires that his neighbors realize his elevated class status (150). Supposedly, “he would have despised any ostentation of expense,” but “it had never occurred to him that he should live in any other than what he would have called an ordinary way, with green glasses for hock, and excellent waiting at table” (348). Eliot humorously juxtaposes Lydgate’s professed disdain
toward social advantages with the reality of his personal expectations and beliefs in the value of the things he disdains. The irony of his character originates in the disconnection between his aspirations and his reality. While struggling to reform social prejudices negatively hindering the progress of medicine and science, he is himself guilty of adhering to dogmas that hinder the progress of society in other areas. The reader should remember that for Organicists, all areas of society are interconnected. Thus, any positive influence Lydgate contributes to science will be cancelled out by the negative influence of his phallocentric ideas about women. Accordingly, Michael Tondre identifies Lydgate’s efforts as “wasted energy,” in his remarkable study of the influences of energy science (another of Eliot’s interests) within the plot of *Middlemarch* (204). Tondre’s argument also supports a reading of *Middlemarch* as Eliot’s attempt to mend society, though he frames his ideas within the concept of energy science. Tondre states, “Eliot came to imagine how unproductive, prodigal acts of reading could bring about an ethically revitalized world” (206). Therefore, Lydgate’s action within the context of the novel might be “wasted,” but the morals passed—or “diffused,” to use Tondre’s terms—through the story to the reader “create constructive tissues or influence throughout the social medium” (206). In other words, Lydgate is part of Eliot’s literary scientific experiment. She uses his character to prove her theory to readers that science cannot exist in the presence of egoism and preconceived notions.

Like so many scientists, Lydgate’s greatest hindrance to participating in true science is his painfully blatant gender bias. He scoffs at the hierarchy and social leveraging in medicine while retaining hierarchical, statically oppressive beliefs about female nature that essentially provide him with social leverage above women. His prejudiced dogmas are
identical to those demonstrated by Brooke, Casaubon, Chettham, and the rest of the conventional male-dominated world. For instance, Lydgate discounts Dorothea's marriageability because although she has “undeniable beauty,” “she did not look at things from the proper feminine angle” (95). Mary Garth, another strong female character in the novel, comments on her aversion to Lydgate because he seems not to see her when they are speaking (113). In fact, Lydgate values women like his first love, Madame Laure, who “talked little...that was an additional charm” (151-152). Lydgate lauds Rosamond Vincy for possessing “just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman” (164). Rosamond “was instructed to the true womanly limit and not a hair's-breadth beyond—docile, therefore and ready to carry out behests which came from beyond that limit” (352). In fact, he appreciates a woman whose ignorance leads her to stand in awe of his intellect.

Though Lydgate wants to reform science, he has been raised “listening to the talk of men” (143), and Farebrother accurately describes the conflict Lydgate faces if he is going to be a successful reformer. When Lydgate declares that he wants to reform medicine from within, Farebrother answers him: “your scheme is a good deal more difficult to carry out than the Pythagorean community, though. You have not only got the old Adam in yourself against you, but you have got all those descendants of the original Adam who form the society around you” (173). In order to aid in reforming science and medicine, then, Lydgate will not only have to find a way to overcome his own egoism and prejudiced thinking, but to somehow overcome all his scientific peers who jealously guard their power-retaining dogmas. And despite Lydgate’s noble intentions and determination “to do with as little of” these corrupting social prejudices as possible, he cannot even bring
himself to entirely relinquish the power he receives from the current scientific structures and conventions.

One disastrous way by which Lydgate falls victim to the corrupt socio-scientific conventions—one of his spots of commonness—is his selection of Rosamond Vincy as wife. Rosamond, in many ways, represents conventional Victorian ideals of femininity, and is credited as such by many of the males of Middlemarch (89, 161). Lydgate espouses disdain for social conventions, yet his and Rosamond’s courtship follows the socially conventional Darwinian model of human sexual selection that Eliot mends in Dorothea’s story. Part of Eliot’s experiment in *Middlemarch* is to show readers the contrast between a marriage built on natural laws that have been perverted by selfish human impulses, and a marriage built on the mended theory, as it occurs in the rest of nature. Clearly readers will agree that the marriage of Dorothea and Will is successful, while that of Lydgate and Rosamond is almost as disastrous as the union of Dorothea and Casaubon. Both of these latter unions follow the Darwinian model, in which the male’s attraction is centered in his intellect and the female’s in her body, and both couples initially perform the gendered roles that society has dogmatically prescribed for them.

The major reason that the Lydges’ marriage fails is because it is contracted on selfish motives by both parties, just as was Dorothea’s and Casaubon’s marriage (and, Eliot seems to be arguing, most marriages following dogmatic social conventions). Clifford Marks discusses the egoism inherent in the marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon, and this same selfishness is reflected in the marriage of Lydgate and Rosamond. According to Marks’ observations of the Casaubons’ marriage, “the difficulties that the two encounter result from their predetermined roles for the other, which are constructed to enhance their
own individuality” (33). Dorothea’s attraction to Casaubon stems from her belief that “Casaubon is someone who can provide the knowledge and experience that she craves so desperately” (31), and she “succumbs to the socially acceptable feminine role of self-abnegation as a means to self-gratification” (33). Meanwhile, Casaubon wants to marry Dorothea because he believes she will stand in awe of his intellect, provide him with “family pleasures,” and serve as his secretary in helping him to finally issue copies of his mythological keys (278-279). Similarly, Rosamond and Lydgate have “predetermined roles” for each other, and each is attracted to the other for what they believe the other can do for them socially. Lydgate is attracted to Rosamond because he believes she will “venerat[e] his high musings and momentous labours” and “create order in the home and accounts with still magic, yet keep her fingers ready to touch the lute and transform life into romance at any moment” (352). He admires her inferior female accomplishments, believing her lesser knowledge will incite her to respect him more:

...he held it one of the prettiest attitudes of the feminine mind to adore a man’s pre-eminence without too precise a knowledge of what it consisted in...For Rosamond never showed any unbecoming knowledge, and was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness which made the irresistible women for the doomed man of that date. (268)

Eliot’s decision to describe the man Rosamond (and women like her) would attract as “doomed” is intriguingly negative and supports Farebrother’s diagnosis of her as a siren (299). Indeed, Rosamond does contribute to the doom of Lydgate’s aspirations as a reformer, and Farebrother’s choice of words proves prophetic.

Rosamond, too, is guilty of wanting to marry Lydgate for the social power she believes he can bring her. She prizes her intended’s “very high connections,” which coupled with his engagement in scientific discoveries would allow her to be transplanted
into a higher circle of society. Though born and bred in the provincial town of Middlemarch, Rosamond has aspirations of rising in status, and “it seemed desirable that Lydgate should by-and-by get some first-rate position elsewhere than in Middlemarch,” which she believes “could hardly be difficult in the case of a man who had a titled uncle and could make discoveries” (356). While readers might be more prone to sympathize with Dorothea’s knowledge-hunger, especially given her character’s bent toward helping others—we might presume she will use her knowledge for bettering her community, as she does with her interest in other areas—Rosamond’s selfishness is less easily dismissed, given her consistent disregard for the interests of any other character.

The egoism inherent in both Lydgate’s and Rosamond’s desires for each other is that each thinks only of how the other can promote his or her own interests, rather than considering ways they could benefit and fulfill each other. And truly, the Darwinian model was egoistically flawed in this way. Women were encouraged to value men whose intellect would allow them to provide the most financial status; men were encouraged to select wives who were beautiful, submissive, who would not attempt to challenge their social power, and who would manage the home and fulfill their reproductive duties. In essence, women married for money and men married for servants. Viewed in this way, Rosamond’s mercenary motives in marrying Lydgate were not uncommon. In her 1845 essay The Great Lawsuit, Margaret Fuller criticizes “civilized Europe” for maintaining “a great majority of societies and individuals...still doubtful whether earthly marriage is to be a union of souls, or merely a contract of convenience and utility” (1611). She points out that many a woman is “perverted, by the current of opinion that seizes her” and influences a woman to view marriage as a means to finding “a home of her own” (1611). The self-preservationist
mentality that Fuller describes as being conditioned into women’s thinking about marriage is certainly present in Rosamond’s character. Howbeit, Rosamond desires not only self-preservation but self-elevation, no matter the cost. Her hedonism and desire for high living is illustrated in the “delightfully reassuring idea” that “supposing...Lydgate died,” Rosamond would inherit his insurance money. In “the meantime,” however, this was “not a self-supporting idea” (354), so although Lydgate desires to remain a country surgeon, free from efforts at social leveraging, Rosamond will continue to pressure him to seek a more socially powerful position elsewhere, one that will enable her to continue to live the luxurious lifestyle she has been accustomed to.

Without knowing, Lydgate kills any potential opportunity for contributing to science when he marries Rosamond and, in so doing, joins his egoism with hers. The result is that Lydgate’s “scientific conscience” was now married to “the debasing company of money obligation and selfish respects” (739). Eliot believed that science could not coexist with dogma, and the Lydges’ marriage is built on selfish, dogmatic beliefs about gender roles. Lydgate has preconceived notions about women and their social role, and Rosamond has preconceived notions about the role that men and husbands should perform. The narrator suggests occasionally throughout the text that Lydgate’s ethical handicap, his spots of egoism and dogmatically phallocentric belief, is not beyond reform. However, by marrying, Lydgate naively commits to Rosamond’s “opposite interests,” and “selfish respects” (667, 739), and since he “cannot part [his] happiness from [hers],” he loses the opportunity to reform science and contribute to society (667). As the narrator states, “in the British climate there is no incompatibility between scientific insight and furnished lodgings: the incompatibility is chiefly between scientific ambition and a wife who objects to that kind of
residence” (679). The kind of residence Rosamond desires is in London, but Lydgate has always desired to “keep away from the range of London” with its “social truckling, and win celebrity, however slowly...by the independent value of his work” (145). He has always aspired “to reject [the] venal decorations” afforded through social posturing; but what Lydgate considers “humbug” is exactly the sort of lifestyle Rosamond desires (145). Rosamond urges Lydgate to relocate to London and engage in “social truckling”: she wants him to take advantage of his high family connections and rather than attempt to go against the medical current to reform it, she advises he instead “think what will be generally liked” (649). At one point, Rosamond even suggests her husband try for a new profession, saying, “I often wish you had not been a medical man...you are clever enough for anything; you might easily have been something else. And your cousins at Quallingham all think that you have sunk below them in your choice of profession” (458). Rosamond’s wish for a different occupation for Lydgate signifies her complete selfishness: not only does she entirely disregard her husband’s professional interests, but she also lacks the compassion for humanity behind her husband’s commitment to science.

Rosamond does not care about Lydgate’s interests, as the text shows, nor the interests of anyone else; she cares only about herself. She is the personification of an egoist. Indeed, the narrator reveals Rosamond’s self-centered thinking early in her courtship with Lydgate:

In Rosamond’s romance, it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero, or of his serious business in the world: of course, he had a profession and was clever, as well as sufficiently handsome; but the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth, which distinguished him from all Middlemarch admirers, and presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people. (166)
Rosamond’s demonstrated thought patterns line up perfectly with the portion of Bernard Paris’s article that defines the positivist’s criteria for an egoist. According to Paris, “the egoist...regards [others] either as extensions of [her]self or as objects to be manipulated” (434). And since egoists like Rosamond see “the world [as] an extension of the ego,” she “is truly at the mercy of circumstances” because her “desires are more often frustrated than fulfilled” (434). In fact, she laments soon after her marriage “that the world was not ordered to her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world” (649). Furthermore, Rosamond’s disdain for associating with “vulgar people” starkly contrasts Lydgate’s altruistic preference for doctoring the poor and reflects her support of hierarchical social organization.

Though he has spots of egotistical commonness, Lydgate’s views are often more in line with those of a positivist, the egoist’s opposite. Whereas an egoist perceives “no clear distinction between self and non-self; the world is an extension of the ego,” a positivist believes “the external world exists and has an autonomous order which does not necessarily correspond to the order of thought” (427). For positivists, “truth is pursued by submitting the mind to the world so that the order of ideas becomes a reflection of the order or phenomena” (427). Eliot’s young surgeon enacts this philosophy through his “long[ing] to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure and help to define men’s thought more accurately after the true order” (148-149). In other words, Lydgate—like Eliot—wants to see social ideas structured after natural laws. The positivist focuses on the world around the self.

Alternatively, egoists like Rosamond believe the world revolves around the self. Her destructive egoism is evidenced by her actions and thoughts, which show that she views
reality as entirely relating to and emanating from herself. She forms relationships based on how the other can benefit her: Will Ladislaw “was gradually becoming necessary to her entertainment” (464); she believes Captain Lydgate’s visit elevates her socially in the minds of her neighbors, and “she had a placid-sense that his rank penetrated them as if it had been an odour” (582); she believes Lydgate dislikes Captain Lydgate because “he was jealous, and she disliked his being jealous” (583); and she views Lydgate’s “moodiness”—which was actually a result of stress from being deep in debt—as “his thoughtful preoccupation with other subjects than herself” (586-7). She also has no capacity for sympathizing with others. In fact, Will “had more comprehension of Lydgate than Rosamond had, and was not offended by his manner, easily imagining outdoor causes of annoyance” (592).

What Rosamond lacks in sympathy was an important characteristic for Eliot and other positivists, because “the individual who has a strongly sympathetic nature…and the ability to imagine the inner states of others has a moral life that is independent of tradition” (Paris 424)—tradition meaning the problematic dogmas around which society (science included) was organized. A sympathetic person “has a more highly developed conscience and a truer sense of good and evil than tradition, in its present state of development,” according to Paris (424). Part of the value of sympathy was acknowledging that others were equally important parts of the same social organism, a fact that Eliot lamented to be “still perversely ignored in our social organization, our ethics and our religion” (Shuttleworth 5). When Eliot was writing Middlemarch, the parasite of egoism and the selfish interests fed from and weakened the social organism.
The conflict between egoism and altruism was a common theme both in Eliot’s life and writings. Barbara Hardy, one of Eliot’s most influential critics and biographers, identifies two earlier works dealing specifically with this topic. Eliot’s “first contrast of egoism and altruism,” according to Hardy, was “A Little Fable with a Great Moral,” published in 1847 (xix). Hardy also considers Eliot’s 1859 publication of “a fantastic novella about extremes of egoism and empathy” (xxii). Eliot’s appraisal of actions that help to better society over those that only work to elevate the individual were increasingly on her mind as she matured as a person and as a writer. She is conscientious about her own actions and intentions, recording in her journal in 1870 that while she has been making progress on the story of “Miss Brooke” and is “unspeakably happy” in her personal life, she feels guilty for “doing little for others” (Harris 142). When Middlemarch turned out to be her most enthusiastically received novel, she expressed her delight at receiving “many deeply affecting assurances of its influence for good on individual minds,” and downplays her newly expanded fame, which she refers to as a “merely egoistic satisfaction” (143).

Because her major characters commonly struggle to overcome selfish thinking, the evolution of Lydgate’s character is predictable, though the trajectory of his character’s arc is perhaps surprising. Lydgate’s “spots of commonness” related largely to his prejudiced ideas about women, so it is apropos that his moral evolution would include movement toward the correction of these preconceived notions. Rosamond—the woman Lydgate originally lauded as “perfect womanhood” (352)—does little to ameliorate his misconceptions; but the narrator points readers to the possibility that Lydgate, who “was less ripe...might possibly have experience before him which would modify his opinion as to the most excellent things in woman” (93). The doctor also has “a disposition to unsettle
what had been settled and forgotten by his elders,” like the egoistic dogmatism concerning female nature (157). In the end, Rosamond actually serves as a foil for Dorothea, whose true value as an individual and an equal to Lydgate he begins to realize.

Although the stories of Lydgate and Dorothea were originally separate, Eliot must have felt that these two characters—equally important though different members of the same social organism—needed each other. An influential German philosopher whose work shaped Eliot’s own thinking, Ludwig Feuerbach, “contends...that we cannot pass directly from our initial egoistic state to an awareness of the world without...[the] contradiction by the consciousness of a being who is indeed another” (435). Dorothea is very much Lydgate’s “other.” The young surgeon’s first dogmatic impression of Dorothea was that “it is troublesome to talk to such women” who are “always wanting reasons, yet...are too ignorant to understand the merits of any question” (93). Lydgate initially preferred women like Rosamond, who “never showed any unbecoming knowledge” or intellectual curiosity (268). As the novel progresses, however, the young surgeon begins to be positively influenced by Dorothea, beginning with his observation of her altruistic, compassionate care for her dying husband. In a moment of undisguised suffering for the concern of another, Dorothea begs Lydgate to tell her what she should do for Casaubon, and “for years after Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him by this involuntary appeal—this cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium” (290). Lydgate’s observations of this other, Dorothea, spark his character’s growth.

The second major interaction that Lydgate has with Dorothea occurs when his marriage has all but dissolved. This scene is the climax of the novel’s experiment: the man
of science submits to the heroine (who has already leveled and naturalized the faulty scientific theory of human sexual selection in her own life) for marriage advice. This is the final stroke in Eliot’s mending of science manipulated by egotistical human ambitions. Men had long retained exclusive control of the rights to the intellect, relegating women to the status of mere body. However, in asking Dorothea for advice, Lydgate “for the first time in his life” (763) lays down his pride and submits his intellect to a woman’s, Dorothea’s.

Though dogmatic scientists like Alexander Walker believed women were incapable of “reasoning—generalizing, forming trains of connected ideas” or “judging” (ix), and Darwin believed men were ultimately always superior in “deep thought, reason, or imagination” (564), Eliot believed that “science has no sex: the mere knowing and reasoning faculties...must go through the same process, and arrive at the same result” ("Woman" 31). Therefore, Eliot does not allow Dorothea to gloat in her newfound position of authority over the voluntarily humbled Lydgate; she simply portrays them as intellectual equals. Dorothea’s only request is that Lydgate tell her the details of his situation, saying, “then we can consult together” (my emphasis, 762). Lydgate further confirms Dorothea’s reformed, equal standing in his eyes when, going away from their conversation, he confesses two things of significance. First, Lydgate tells Dorothea, “everything seems more bearable since I have talked to you” (768)—a complete revision of his initial impression of conversing with her. Secondly, Lydgate thinks to himself, “She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before – a fountain of friendship towards men – a man can make a friend of her” (769). The young scientist’s proclamation is a reversal of Alexander Walker’s claim that woman’s “friendship...requiring the exercise of reason, [is] so feeble as to be worthless” (ix). Eliot, who shared deep and meaningful friendships with many men, shows
her readers, through Dorothea and Lydgate’s relationship, how mutual respect and concern for one another’s interests can bond a woman and a man in friendship.

Tertius Lydgate, Eliot’s brilliant young scientist, has reversed – at least in the case of one woman – some of the harmful dogmatic misconceptions that have crippled science and prevented it from fulfilling its potential to improve the social organism. Through her experiment of Middlemarch, Eliot shows the consequences of marriages contracted according to theories marred by selfish human respects, like gaining (for women) or retaining (for men) social power, and presents the alternative: the successful selection of mates based on nature’s laws. Human egoism had corrupted science, but George Eliot used her art of writing to mend science in a small way. Though an Organicist would agree that even “this subtle movement” with “a woman’s lot for” its “starting point” could influence the whole social organism for the better.


---. *Sex in Mind and Education.* Syracuse: C.W. Bardeen, 1884. Print.


