

Self-(Un)Conscious Narrative of the Female Body

*Dorothea's and Rosamond's "Finger
Rhetoric" in Eliot's Middlemarch*

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Juliet: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

- William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personæ* folded in
her hand.

- George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

In the genre of the Victorian novel, the body frequently "defines the space in which narratology has traditionally described character" (Punday 186). The nineteenth-century Englishwoman idealized in Victorian literature consistently submits to an "essentially reproductive," rather than productive, role in society. Such a woman's morality is directly proportional to a man's successful appropriation of her body, and successful appropriation is measured in the woman's maternal status. Traditionally, the heroine of Victorian novels does not seek this male appropriation of her body—often called the male gaze—and instead attempts to evade it. Indeed, matrimony and childbearing are considered to reward the

heroine who successfully has engaged in polite, self-effacing seductive behaviours that may indicate future submission to a husband. Had Charlotte Brönte's reserved Jane Eyre or George Eliot's other-worldly Dorothea Brooke sought such attention, the heroine would "collid[e] with circumstances, requir[e] chastening, or ... [be] written out of the story" (Newman 3). In explicitly guiding their heroines from such collisions, Brönte and Eliot demonstrate the typical tendency of Victorian novelists to masculinize the contexts in which their heroines discover themselves and, ironically, invoke men as the "crucial figures" in their heroines' lives (Nestor 167).

Beth Newman, in *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity*, argues that George Eliot is unique among Victorian novelists due to her insistence through her most prominent female characters that women "must" resist the desire to function as embodied, submissive centerpieces in male society (3, emphasis original). Within the "particular web" of Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy often are contrasted, respectively, as the "dark heroine" who shuns the male gaze when not oblivious to it and the "fair femme fatale" who revels in it (Eliot 170; Green 87). Eliot invokes the concept that the physical body can define moral character in the opening paragraph of *Middlemarch* and, indeed, particularly differentiates women in this respect:

Young women of such birth, living in a quiet country-house, and attending a village church hardly larger than a parlour, naturally regarded frippery as the ambition of a huckster's daughter. Then there was well-bred economy, which in those days made show in dress the first item to be deducted from, when any margin was required for expenses more distinctive of rank. (Eliot 29)

This descriptive but reductionistic dissimilarity supposed of Dorothea, a young woman "of such birth," and Rosamond, "a huckster's daughter," ignores the rejection of the idealized nineteenth-century Englishwoman's uncompromising submission that both Dorothea and Rosamond will express in subsequent pages (Eliot 29). Although acting on different motivations, Eliot's most prominent female characters in *Middlemarch* demonstrate the "peculiar centrality of [each woman's] own subjectivity" that not only thwarts the first husbands of both Dorothea and Rosamond, but

also prevents either woman's fulfilled moral potential, through matrimony and childbearing, which Middlemarch society desires (Green 87). Representations of the female body in the forms of Dorothea and Rosamond rarely encompass the entire body. The conventionally poeticized features, comprising the eyes, lips, and neck, appear slightly more often in description. Most frequent in appearance and most significant to the argument that Dorothea and Rosamond persistently reject the idealized woman's role, however, are Dorothea and Rosamond's hands—a common literary symbol of agency even before Lady Macbeth's hands bore stains (Rowe 14). Consequent of the societal belief that a woman's appearance and activities should be "repressed and redirected onto behaviors that proved [her] morality," the nineteenth-century idealized Englishwoman directed her hands to activities, such as childrearing and praying, that benefited her husband, family, and society (Shaffer 43). This intended removal of communicated self-consciousness and self-agency from the female body, however, is not present in the independence sought and embraced by Dorothea and Rosamond. Rather, Dorothea's and Rosamond's finger rhetoric in *Middlemarch* demonstrates each woman's embrace of activities that reflect her personal interests, exemplified by Dorothea's sketches of plans for new cottages for the poor and Rosamond's frequent performances at the piano.

The "finger rhetoric" in which I argue that Dorothea and Rosamond engage takes its nomenclature from one of Eliot's passages on Caleb Garth (Eliot 438). The relevance of this passage to Dorothea and Rosamond, both of whom seek their own versions of "the most honourable work that is," lies in Caleb's method of self-meditation (Eliot 438):

... [Caleb] still sat holding his letters in his hand and looking on the ground meditatively, stretching out the fingers of his left hand, according to a mute language of his own. At last he said— 'It's a thousand pities Christy didn't take to business, Susan, I shall want help by-and-by. And Alfred must go off to the engineering—I've made up my mind to that.' He fell into meditation and finger rhetoric again for a little while... (Eliot 437-438)

The initial image in Eliot's prelude to *Middlemarch* of "the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother" foreshadows the manner in which Dorothea and Rosamond use their hands

to meditate on and to communicate, simultaneously, their common rejection of “the social will to interpellate them as exemplary subjects” and their subsequent pursuits of a self-determined female role (Eliot 25; Green 87). The activities each applies herself to demonstrates each woman’s consciousness or unconsciousness of her physical and empathetic selves. Thus, in individuating their roles as women, Dorothea and Rosamond establish their strong self-agency; in communicating such self-agency primarily through finger rhetoric, Dorothea and Rosamond symbolically and literally rebel against the simplistic and “essentially reproductive” physicality desired of a nineteenth-century Englishwoman (Matus 215).

Dorothea

... a breathing blooming girl, whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish grey drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair.

- George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Dorothea’s chosen activities and actions reveal her limited consciousness of her physical self. Descriptions of Dorothea’s “so finely formed” hand and wrist originate outside her self-consciousness and usually from the narrative voice, which observes that Dorothea’s hands are “not thin hands, or small hands; but powerful, feminine, maternal hands” (29, 61). Naumann, a German painter of Will’s acquaintance, echoes the narrative voice’s delineation of Dorothea’s “one beautiful ungloved hand” with his own exclamation regarding “that wonderful left hand” (220). Yet in the scene in which Dorothea pays the greatest attention to her hands, she is not aware of her physical self, much less her beauty, and instead focuses exclusively on her mother’s emerald- and diamond-studded ring and bracelet:

‘They are lovely,’ said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely-turned finger and wrist, and holding them towards the window on a level with her eyes. All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy.

...
 She took up her pencil without removing the jewels, and still
 looking at them. She thought of often having them by her, to
 feed her eye at these little fountains of pure colour. (36)

Even Naumann's request, as he sketches Dorothea, that she resume her original stance, "leaning so, with [her] cheek against [her] hand," does not awaken physical self-consciousness in Dorothea (249). Indeed, Dorothea complies without "affected airs and laughs" (248). Nor are Dorothea's hands engaged in an elaborate toilette each morning except in producing "the simply braided dark-brown hair," and Dorothea wears the "wedding-ring on that wonderful left hand" as a sign of personal propriety rather than as an adornment (220). Thus, Dorothea's finger rhetoric communicates her unconscious ignorance and, at times, conscious suppression of her physicality such that her self-agency is not oriented by physical self-consciousness. That the physical actions of her hands indicate extreme emotion or act out a personal code of decorum rather than demonstrate physical coquetry is best exemplified in Dorothea's unconsciously "childlike" and "impetuous" hand-clasping when she urges her uncle to improve Tipton Grange and in her formal, albeit tense, handshakes with Will (424). From her Puritanical refusal to wear jewelry in company to her sobbing outburst to Will that she "want[s] so little—no new clothes," Dorothea rejects acting as the idealized woman who, in Mr. Chichely's words, "lays herself out a little more to please [men]" (870, 115).

As if to compensate for her lack of physical self-consciousness, Dorothea displays a determined, if dilettantish, empathy for both abstract and actual others through her hands' actions and activities. Whether she takes a drawing pencil to hand or fervently folds her hands into prayer "as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles," her finger rhetoric reveals a personal independence tending toward empathetic extremes (31). Most often mentioned and most exemplary are Dorothea's sketches of plans for new cottages, which is an activity that, like riding, she intends to renounce upon Celia's divulgence that Sir James likely will incorporate Dorothea's interests into his courtship:

Celia could not help relenting. 'Poor Dodo,' she went on, in an amiable staccato. 'It is very hard: it is your favourite *fad* to draw plans.' *Fad* to draw plans; Do you think I only care about

my fellow-creatures' houses in that childish way? I may well make mistakes. How can one ever do anything nobly Christian, living among people with such petty thoughts?' (60)

Pauline Nestor notes Eliot's "ambivalent" opinion of women's interrelations, here taking the characterization of "the divisive, destructive element" between Dorothea and Celia even as the former of the sisters hopes to embrace the alternate, "positive, sustaining role" available to her (167).

The poor of Tipton, Freshitt, and Lowick are not the only abstract recipients of the empathetic work of Dorothea's hands. Prior to and at the beginning of her first marriage, Dorothea abstracts Casaubon as a husband who "was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew" based on her independently, rather than societally, determined belief that nineteenth-century "[w]omen's knowledge was to be relative to men's needs" (Eliot 32; Green 75). Celia's criticism of Casaubon's appearance and reticence and Mr. Brooke's singularly astute observation that Dorothea "had more of [her] own opinion than most girls" helps to create in Dorothea an almost vengeful, highly conscious empathy, causing her to take in hand a pencil to write dictations or a book to read so that she might save Casaubon's eyesight with her hands (64).

Yet the early trials of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon sever this empathetic enthusiasm, and Dorothea's empathy for the abstracted Casaubon yields to pitying empathy for the actual man: "[I]f she were to say, 'No! if you die, I will put no finger to your work'—it seemed as if she would be crushing that bruised heart" (521). As Caleb Garth seeks to perform good work with his own hands, Dorothea wishes to render good deeds through hers. Dorothea's marriage to Will becomes the most emotionally significant of her good deeds: no longer, then, are her hands "tied from making up to him for any unfairness in his lot" (583). Indeed, in joining her hand with Will's in marriage, Dorothea does not sacrifice her self-agency but rather embraces the unity of her empathetic personal interests with her husband's in the "struggle against [wrongs]" (894). She is neither "fettered" nor "weak" (523).

Rosamond

Rosamond left her husband's knee and walked slowly to the other end of the room; when she turned round and walked

towards him it was evident that the tears had come, and that she was biting her under-lip and clasping her hands to keep herself from crying.

- George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

The activities and actions in which Rosamond engages her hands reveals a hyper-consciousness of her physical self to the extent that her hands are simultaneously the means of adornment and adornments themselves. That Rosamond's hands are "small," "little," "plump," "taper," and "white" may be due to Nature rather than to Rosamond (471, 716, 125, 638, 827). However, Rosamond deliberately accentuates her hands, which are "duly set off with rings," in each of her actions (471):

But she remained simply serious, turned her long neck a little, and put up her hand to touch her wondrous hair-plaits—an habitual gesture with her as pretty as any movements of a kitten's paw. Not that Rosamond was in the least like a kitten: she was a sylph caught young and educated at Mrs Lemon's. (189)

Whether she is working on "some trivial chain-work" or performing at the piano, Rosamond displays "the executant's instinct" in showing her hands and her appearance in general to the best physical advantage (335, 190). Her hands' delicate and practiced movements indicate the degree of Rosamond's assurance of her self-agency, exemplified by how she drops her tating from her hands when her "most perfect management of self-contented grace" is disturbed by the unexpected entrance of Lydgate (335). Yet Rosamond, both the "best girl in the world" and Mr. Chichely's ideal woman, accepts the compliments but not the hands of most of her male suitors in order to preserve herself as "the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly, and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked" (139-140, 716).

Despite Rosamond's success in polite seduction, however, she is nineteenth-century society's idealized woman often in appearance but never in motivation. Her conscious maintenance of her physical appearance, particularly in putting up her plaits, allows her to appropriate the hands of Lydgate—who unconsciously had "show[n] his large white hands to much advantage, as Rosamond thought"—without need to busy her own

(303). Rosamond's conscious preservation of her own physical beauty consequently conflicts with society's belief that a woman's worth was in her body and its "proper deployment," yet Rosamond consciously uses her beauty's provincial influence to reverse the typical gendered power dynamics when Lydgate's arrival in Middlemarch brings "the necessary materials ... at hand" (Shaffer 40; Eliot 305).

The actions of Rosamond's hands communicate a self-conscious empathy as well. Frequently doubled in the text, both literally as "the [nymph] in the glass, and the one out of it" and speculatively as her present self and "a romantic heroine," Rosamond empathizes with her abstracted self as if it were her actual self (139, 331). Indeed, she withdraws her hand whenever she is made uncomfortable or whenever she fears losing influence despite her attractive appearance. During her marriage to Lydgate, Rosamond rearranges her hands to maintain her own comfort as she repeatedly removes her hands from Lydgate's to her tating or to her sides, symbolizing the simultaneous removal of her affection from Lydgate to herself. When she "clasp[s] her hands to keep herself from crying," Rosamond demonstrates the self-agency and self-empathy involved in such gestures (700). When confronted after Lydgate receives Sir Godwin's letter, Rosamond retreats "with her hands folded before her ... intrenching herself in quiet passivity," invoking her former physical stance before her unworthy Middlemarch admirers (715). Although Rosamond appears to obey Lydgate's frequent summons—"Come dear, put down that work and come to me"—her apparent compliance is a formality rather than the yielding prized by Victorian society (699). Rosamond returns to activities that will flatter her abstracted idealized self the most, whether it is tating or applying for financial assistance, even when she is ill:

[Rosamond] arranged all objects around her with the same nicety as ever, only with more slowness—or sat down to the piano, meaning to play, and then desisting, yet lingering on the music stool with her white fingers suspended on the wooden front, and looking before her in dreamy ennui. (827)

Twice in the text Rosamond extends her empathy to actual others, both instances of which are expressed through hand gestures. Once, at the advent of her marriage's financial troubles, Rosamond literally reaches out to her husband as she "put his hair lightly away from his

forehead, then laid her other hand on his, and was conscious of forgiving him" (639); Rosamond and Lydgate are, in this moment, "under the power of that same past" of courtship in which the lovers' empathy is shared in "momentary touches of finger-tips" (639, 380). The second instance occurs during Rosamond's second meeting with Dorothea, which Rosamond prepares for by "wrapping her soft shawl around her" as if it were "cold reserve" (850). Yet Dorothea's approach, with her hand outstretched, evokes in Rosamond "a doubt of her own prepossessions," and the women's resulting handshake transcends mere social propriety (851); a compromise of "the divisive, destructive element" and "the positive, sustaining role" has been struck (Nestor 167). Overall, however, Rosamond's empathetic actions toward actual others do not detract from her persistent self-agency and consciously limited empathy.

Dorothea and Rosamond, Née The "Dark Heroine" and "Fair Femme Fatale"

Together, these physical and empathetic self-(un)consciousnesses define both Dorothea's and Rosamond's personal motivations to pursue an independent, self-determined role that preserves self-agency instead of accepting the idealized nineteenth-century Englishwoman's role that suppresses it. Dorothea and Rosamond engage their hands in activities that reflect personal, not societal, interests, and their resulting finger rhetoric provides significant insight into the motivation of each woman for self-agency and particularly into the apparently ironic enthusiasm of each in giving her hand in marriage—an action that nineteenth-century English society would have regarded as an ultimate surrender of self-agency. That both Dorothea and Rosamond prior to their first marriages "imagin[e] that marriage will reward [their] true worth" indicates the extent to which each has embraced her self-idealized role as a woman (Green 88).

Yet Dorothea's and Rosamond's different, if not opposite, combinations of physical and empathetic self-(un)consciousnesses differentiate the women as Eliot's "dark heroine" and "fair femme fatale" (Green 87). Such differentiation describes each woman's motivation, exemplified best, respectively, in Dorothea's desire for a supporting role in which she "learn[s] to read Latin and Greek ... as Milton's daughters did" and in Rosamond's desire to be "a romantic heroine, and [play] the part prettily" (87-88, 331); hence, Rosamond "put[s] up her hand to touch her wondrous

hair-plaits" to ensure that she looks the heroine's part, while Dorothea's "one beautiful ungloved hand pillow[s] her cheek" in empathy with the sculpture of Ariadne (189, 220). These self-determined female roles of helper and heroine demonstrate "the delusion of each about the peculiar centrality of her own subjectivity" (Green 87). That Eliot presents the former, but not the latter, role as deserving of an epic "name on the earth" emerges as perhaps the greatest irony when Dorothea's and Rosamond's motivations for securing self-agency, ultimately and ironically through marriage, are compared (896).

Equally fervent in rejecting the role of the nineteenth-century's idealized woman, Dorothea and Rosamond differ in their expressions of and motivations for this rejection. That their hands divulge their physical and empathetic self-(un)consciousnesses suggests the inexorable "centrality of [their] own subjectivity" as itself a form of self-agency (Green 87). The proverbial but self-agent "Destiny stands by sarcastic" with Rosamond's "*dramatis personæ* folded in her hand," revealed in the text to be her married life with Lydgate and again with an elderly, wealthy physician (122). Dorothea as the "new Theresa," however, finds her destiny in realizing the empathetic joining of her self-Will as that (896):

Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

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