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Review of Middlemarch in the Twenty-first Century

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Karen Chase, ed., *Middlemarch in the Twenty-first Century* (Oxford University Press, 2006). pp. xi + 159. ISBN 0 19 516995 6

This set of eight original essays engages afresh with a novel that many readers might claim to know well, in such a way as to make ‘the lights and shadows ... fall with a certain difference’ (chap. xxi). Karen Chase is well-known for her own studies of George Eliot, not least *George Eliot: ‘Middlemarch’* (1991). Here, she confines herself to an introductory essay, which cogently states the brief given to her contributors, to reflect on how *Middlemarch* can be read in the twenty-first century. ‘Who besides Eliot has been better aware of the alteration of objects given a change in perspective?’ she asks rhetorically (p. 4), and proposes some different relativities from those that have been orthodox in discussions of George Eliot’s greatest novel, especially in the last half-century. A glancing comparison with *Wuthering Heights*, for example, gives a new dimension to the ongoing comparisons of George Eliot and ‘the Brontës’. The goal is not novelty for its own sake. Rather, *Middlemarch* is accorded the status of being ripe for irreverence, ‘something this novel sorely needs after more than a century of worship’ (p. 9). Chase describes the unplanned but highly welcome result that *Middlemarch* is confirmed as ‘an open text with illimitable interpretations’, by authors who are evidently enjoying themselves in their present engagement with it (p. 9).

The team assembled is essentially Anglo-American, four men and four women, mostly high profile Victorianists. The substantial expertise each brings to their commission involves little traversing of old ground, though in some cases (notably Hillis Miller’s ‘A Conclusion in Which Almost Nothing Is Concluded: *Middlemarch*’s “Finale”’), there is explicit moving on from and refinement of earlier positions. Take, for instance, Gillian Beer’s *tour de force*, ‘What’s Not in *Middlemarch*’, which leads off the collection. At least initially stimulated by recent interest in the materiality of texts, Dame Gillian takes us back to the situation of those who read the novel as it came out in its eight book-length parts between December 1871 and December 1872, implicitly interrogating many readings of the novel since. She makes great capital of the advertisements, with wonderful disquisitions on sewing machines, and on manganese, and on chocolate. Her real theme, absences from *Middlemarch*, is argued by means of subtly disorienting assertions, circling principally through appetite, both gustatory and sexual. Moreover, Beer reminds us in yet another salient recontextualization, ‘The spiritual is absent from this book’, commenting further on ‘[t]hat principled denial of religious comfort in *Middlemarch* the novel ... has become almost invisible to many readers now’ (p. 27).

In ‘The Materiality of *Middlemarch*’, Kate Flint comes at her subject from different angles, considering animate as well as inanimate objects, and drawing to great point and purpose on her familiarity with nineteenth-century science especially in relation to sensory perception. And so the delights unfold: David Trotter takes on ‘Space, Movement, and Sexual Feeling in *Middlemarch*’, in a discussion that has interesting affinities with Elizabeth Deeds Ermath on ‘Negotiating *Middlemarch*’ (via George Eliot’s ‘Notes on Form in Art’). Probably the most provocative essay is Nina Auerbach’s playful and only partly joking ‘Dorothea’s Lost Dog’. Try this for an arresting opening: ‘Dorothea Brooke has always irritated me: in fact, she makes my flesh creep’ (p. 87). Auerbach’s setting of cats among pigeons (though it is as a doglover that she characterises herself) contrasts with the tightly-argued piece by Daniel Siegel, ‘Losing

for Profit', which takes off from Jeff Nunokawa in considering property and philanthropy in *Middlemarch*. Finally, there is a perceptive treatment by Jakob Lothe of 'Narrative Vision in *Middlemarch*: The Novel Compared with the BBC Television Adaptation', which moves perceptively beyond the usual round of adaptation discussions.

There have of course been a number of comparable volumes of essays by various hands over time: Barbara Hardy, *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel* (1967), whose contributors were an older guard; Ian Adam's *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch* (1975), celebrating the centenary of the novel, including a relatively early piece by Beer; and I would add Kathleen Blake's *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Middlemarch* (1990) in a Modern Language Association of America series. (I am excluding collections of previously published pieces.) Each of them, in their time and according to their lights, provided fresh understanding of *Middlemarch*. Karen Chase's collection draws on and goes beyond the work of such predecessors in a way that amply testifies to the inexhaustible riches of George Eliot. I am confident that this book will instruct and delight both those who like me have been reading *Middlemarch* for decades, and those privileged to be making its acquaintance for the first time.

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