

5-26-2015

# A Little World in Ruins: Rosamond Vincy and the Insufficiency of Performative Gender Roles in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

Allan Spencer

*Pepperdine University*, [jeffery.spencer@pepperdine.edu](mailto:jeffery.spencer@pepperdine.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

Spencer, Allan (2015) "A Little World in Ruins: Rosamond Vincy and the Insufficiency of Performative Gender Roles in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *Global Tides*: Vol. 9, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol9/iss1/3>

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In reading fiction, one is afforded a partial but valuable glimpse into the society in which any given piece of literature is written. Certain authors intentionally craft characters whose relationship to society at large serves to elucidate that society, thereby granting a sort of cultural understanding that reciprocally illuminates the nuances of the characters themselves. George Eliot is one of those authors and *Middlemarch* is a novel that does just that. In a temporal sense, Eliot carefully situates the novel in her nation's not-so-distant past, with the events significantly occurring in and around the time of the Reform Bill of 1832, thereby emphasizing the shifting cultural values of Victorian England. Indeed, there are few facets of Victorian society that are exempt from Eliot's scrutiny in *Middlemarch*. The intimate, psychological perspective afforded by the novel's omniscient third-person narrator provides the reader with unadulterated access into the inner worlds of its characters, and it is through these characters that Eliot reveals Victorian society. In particular, by providing insight into female minds that are just as fully realized as those of their male counterparts, the importance of gender in relation to the social fabric of Victorian England becomes unavoidably entwined in the novel's narrative and thematic concerns.

While much interest, admiration, and scholarship have been devoted to Dorothea Brooke, often considered *Middlemarch*'s de facto protagonist, the other female members of the community—who are equally central to Eliot's vision of society—tend to fall to the wayside. One of these, Rosamond Vincy, is best known for incurring the ire of readers everywhere due to her astounding egoism. However, in spite of Rosamond's intense disagreeableness, "George Eliot never belittles individual pain, female or male, nor is she in any way indifferent to the hunger for a fuller life" (Thomas 394). Rosamond yearns, just as Dorothea yearns to make a meaningful impact on the world and Rosamond's husband, Tertius Lydgate, yearns to make important advancements in the medical field. Rosamond's desire for upward mobility may be

more petty and conventional than the desires of Dorothea or Lydgate, but the pain that arises from her failure to realize that dream is no less real, and, therefore, Rosamond is not exempt from Eliot's empathy. In fact, it is precisely her conformity to traditional modes of female social acceptability in pursuit of her goals that serves to illustrate "the inadequacy of the options available to women who want to direct their own lives [in the Victorian era]" (Thomas 398).

Rosamond attempts to gain power via the utilization of Victorian gender roles, but it is those very roles and their incompatibility with the best interest of women that thwart her efforts. She first plays the part of the thoughtless and doting angel in order to appeal to Lydgate's conceptions of a female domestic ideal; when their marriage proves to be less than fulfilling, Rosamond embraces the revival of medievalism in Victorian culture by becoming the Arthurian courtly lover in an attempt to ensnare Will Ladislav and divert his worship of Dorothea to herself instead; finally, an altogether different Rosamond reveals herself in her final, climactic meeting with Dorothea as the two women together are able to drop all pretense and end the masquerade in an attempt to ease one another's pain in a genuine display of female empathy. Only in the final situation, in which convention is thrown to the wind and Rosamond is able to separate herself briefly from her socialization as a Victorian woman, is there anything redemptive and fulfilling. Eliot, therefore, uses Rosamond and her failure to attain that which she yearns after to demonstrate the ultimate insufficiency of conventional gender roles to convey any meaningful sense of power or fulfillment to women across Victorian society.

In beginning to understand Rosamond's initial relationship with her husband, in which Rosamond essentially casts herself in the role of Coventry Patmore's "Angel in the House," it is important to turn first to her upbringing and background. Indeed, even from a young age, "The power structures inherent in the domestic household, and the codes of social conduct...were aspects of life from which no nineteenth-century woman was immune" (Shattock 4-5).

Rosamond is socialized throughout her childhood and adolescence in such a way that she is continuously rewarded for conforming to societal conceptions of ideal femininity. In regard to her education,

She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs Lemon's school, the chief school in the county, where the teachings included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage. Mrs Lemon herself had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional. (89)

Even Rosamond's schooling is fundamentally gendered, including lessons in all the trivial proprieties expected of a young woman of her rank. Furthermore, because she excels at her lessons and is praised far and wide as a result, Rosamond comes to associate this ideal, domestic femininity with success. Thus, it is unsurprising that embracing domestic ideology is Rosamond's first move in her gambit to ensnare Lydgate, and—through his aristocratic familial connections—to move upwards in a socio-economic sense.

Of course, it is also vital to take into account that at no point in the narrative does Rosamond's projection of submissive gentility constitute her true self. On the contrary, Rosamond is ambitious and cunning from the very beginning, deliberately presenting herself as docile in order to impress. Rosamond may be blind in many ways, but she is also clever, understanding that while “this use of beauty and sexuality to manipulate men...is, of course, the power that gains women any sort of economic or social status in a patriarchal society, this society also requires women to preserve an appearance of angelic innocence and passivity” (Cosslett 75-76). She is pragmatic in her pursuit of Lydgate's hand in marriage, having established that “a stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had

always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connexions at all like her own” (109). Indeed, what draws Rosamond to Lydgate in the first place is “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” (156). For Rosamond, a husband is a means to an end, with that end being the enjoyment of upper-class society. Furthermore, she craves “a man of talent, also, whom it would be especially delightful to enslave” (110). Rosamond is desperately desirous of power, an almost admirable quality in a character who is disenfranchised because of her sex, and yet Rosamond is ultimately in no position to overcome the patriarchal system because she herself is so rooted within it.

Rosamond is, of course, initially successful in capturing Lydgate’s attention; his sexist and simplistic understanding of women is perfectly compatible with the performance Rosamond puts on for him. As Lydgate departs a gathering at the Vincy home early in his acquaintance with Rosamond, he reflects,

Certainly, if falling in love had been at all in question, it would have been quite safe with a creature like this Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman—polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence. Lydgate felt sure that if ever he married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys. (153)

Lydgate is thus hardly blameless for his later marital unhappiness, for his “tragedy can be directly traced to his prejudices toward women, which caused him first to marry the sort of woman he did and then to relate to her in a manner that inhibited mutual love” (Patrick 227). He becomes smitten only with the idea of Rosamond, failing entirely to conceive of the imperfect human self in all its complexity that lies beneath the angelic façade. His ruin is as self-imposed as that of his wife, and is due in no small part to the idealization of domestic femininity.

Rosamond, meanwhile, commits herself further to this performance in pursuit of marriage to the well-born Lydgate, “being from morning till night her own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness” (156). When her efforts are rewarded and the pair does become engaged, it is Rosamond’s tears and apparent weakness that, for Lydgate, “shook flirtation into love” (282). His very decision to enter into wedlock with Rosamond hinges entirely on his false perception of her as weak and requiring a man’s protection and guidance. True to precedent, Rosamond is rewarded for presenting herself in such a way, but it quickly becomes all too evident that her masquerade as the Angel in the House can only carry her so far on the road to fulfillment.

Initially, conjugal life is amenable to Rosamond, who feels that her marriage is “visibly as well as ideally floating her above the Middlemarch level,” causing her to anticipate a future “bright with letters and visits to and from Quellingham, and vague advancement in consequence for Tertius” (546). She is optimistic about the connections she makes with Lydgate’s aristocratic family and feels that she, too, is all the while rising to match them in rank and status. However, this illusion begins to shatter at first slowly and then all at once. Essentially, because “Rosamond's character has been shaped by a prejudicial process of socialization whereby she blindly accepted the ‘feminine’ role of cultivating the qualities that would make her admired... This prepared Rosamond nicely for getting a husband but not for relating to one”

(Patrick 228). This first becomes evident in a lack of patience for Lydgate's devotion to his medical practice and is compounded severely when she learns of the immense debt he has incurred, effectively tarnishing Rosamond's imagined trajectory of upward mobility. Having utilized every womanly grace at her disposal to bring herself into matrimony with Lydgate, suddenly Rosamond realizes that, regardless of how well she embodies the domestic ideology, she is imprisoned within a marriage that will not give her the socio-economic power for which she yearns. For this, she blames Lydgate. In some ways, Rosamond instinctually clings to the ideas of femininity that she has been socialized to accept, and therefore "imagines that by refusing to share Lydgate's financial woes and keeping scientific equipment out of her home, she fulfills her domestic role of preserving the home from the market" (Elliot 203). In other ways, however, Rosamond engages in rebellion against her husband—albeit rebellion cloaked in womanly propriety—all the while convinced that her actions are justified and that "no woman could behave more irreproachably than she was behaving" (561). Lydgate destroys her misplaced expectations of affluence, and Rosamond, in turn, destroys his reductive understanding of women—and of herself—as submissive and docile. She disregards Lydgate's prohibition against asking her father for financial assistance, and her insurgence escalates as she sabotages her husband's attempt to put their house on the market and secretly—and mortifyingly for Lydgate—appeals to his aristocratic relations for aid. Once, Lydgate "had regarded Rosamond's cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman." At this point, however, "He was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was—what was the shape into which it had run as into a close network aloof and independent" (549-50).

It is at this point in the novel that Rosamond's persistent ennui makes its first appearance. Shortly after her financial troubles are revealed, a pervasive sense of pain and hopelessness joins her icy resentment of Lydgate. This woman, who desires power in a society in which, by design,

women are powerless, finds herself at an impasse; Eliot writes, “She was oppressed by ennui... ‘There really is nothing to care for much,’ said poor Rosamond inwardly” (564). The outward Angel in the House has proved sufficient to secure her a husband of good breeding, but now fails to provide solace when that husband is not all Rosamond has dreamed he would be. The inward Rosamond suffers as a result; no lesson at Mrs. Lemon’s school has prepared her for this type of bitter disappointment. In regard to Lydgate, “she had mastered him” (628); still, though she achieves a dominance over her husband rare in Victorian society, the power she holds over him is little consolation, demonstrating that “Eliot’s is a valuable view of crippling restrictions in the domestic sphere and the entire ideology of the Angel in the House, which underwrote it” (Langland 134). Failed by the feminine behavior she has been socialized to believe would always bring her success, and hurting deeply as a result, Rosamond instead takes on a new role available to the Victorian female in a vain attempt to banish her ennui and reestablish direction in a life that has been derailed.

In reaction to the swift progress that is often associated with the Victorian era, a yearning for and romanticization of the past began to occur; this manifested itself as the phenomenon of Victorian medievalism, and “It was through nostalgia such as theirs for an older, simpler form of society which was being replaced by the competitive commercialism of the industrial age that this myth arose” (Culler 152). Just as Rosamond is beset by her own Victorian ennui, “by the third decade of the nineteenth century,” precisely the time at which *Middlemarch* is set, “the average Englishman [or Englishwoman] was becoming increasingly disenchanted with his [or her] own age” (Culler 154). Historically, this gave way to a celebration of England’s medieval roots, notably including an exaltation of the tradition of courtly love that permeates Arthurian legend. At the center of the notion of courtly love is “the lover’s worship of an idealized lady. His love was an ennobling discipline, not necessarily consummated, but based on sexual

attraction” (Wollock 31). This is a model that appeals to Rosamond, and in it she perceives the opportunity for female autonomy and empowerment that is absent from the Victorian domestic ideal. Though courtly love is most commonly associated with medieval knights, “It is a mistake to think of chivalry and courtly love as purely masculine enterprises in which women could expect to only play passive roles...[women] should not be regarded simply as enablers or victims, but also as full participants, beneficiaries, and co-creators of these cultural systems” (Wollock 7). As her marriage to Lydgate continues to decline, Rosamond sheds the identity of the Angel in the House and instead embraces Victorian medievalism by endeavoring to become the courtly lover; she still desires power, but now hopes to obtain it via extramarital worship conveyed upon her by male admirers.

Rosamond’s first foray into this new identity is elicited in response to a visit from Will Ladislaw. Her cleverness and perception lead her to realize Will’s hidden romantic longing for Dorothea, and—inspired by his devotion to this other woman—she begins to fantasize about redirecting that worship toward herself instead. Stepping away from her domestic socialization in the direction of what is essentially another artificial, socially constructed female role, albeit one that appears to be more conducive to her overarching goals,

Rosamond felt herself beginning to know a great deal of the world, especially in discovering—what when she was in her unmarried girlhood had been inconceivable to her except as a dim tragedy in bygone costumes—that women, even after marriage, might make conquests and enslave men...How delightful to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side—himself in fact a subject—while the captives look up for ever hopeless, losing rest probably, and if their appetite too, so much the better! (410)

The sway that the female is able to hold over her male counterpart is alluring to Rosamond, for within the tradition of courtly love, “The lover sings the song; he is the lady’s inferior and her adoring votive; his love inspires and refines him; above all, he is totally possessed by love, and all he does is in response to it” (O’Donoghue 5). In theory, the medieval notion of courtly love seems entirely in line with Rosamond’s previously expressed desire for “a man...whom it would be especially delightful to enslave” (110). However, this romantic ideal never truly comes to correspond to reality for poor Rosamond, who instead simply deludes herself with the prospect of worship and power in a desperate attempt to ward off the lack of efficacy and powerlessness she feels as a Victorian woman.

Initially, Rosamond identifies two potential conquests in her budding career as courtly lover—Will Ladislaw and Captain Lydgate, Tertius’ cousin. This upper-class relation, the son of a baronet, makes a visit to the Lydgates in Middlemarch, a visit that Rosamond chooses to interpret as “a source of unprecedented but gracefully-concealed exultation” (545). Rosamond immediately finds Captain Lydgate—or perhaps his wealth and rank—charming and proceeds to misconstrue his every action in such a way that she feels assured of his affection toward her. Captain Lydgate, however, is found to be disagreeable by most of the inhabitants of Middlemarch, including Tertius and Will, whose aversion to the man she also misinterprets. Believing that Will’s frequent visits are evidence of a hidden admiration for her, “Rosamond thought she knew perfectly well why Mr Ladislaw disliked the Captain: he was jealous, and she liked his being jealous” (547). Of course, Rosamond is mistaken on both counts; after Captain Lydgate’s departure, he fails entirely to respond to Rosamond’s correspondence, and shortly thereafter Will—with his reputation tarnished by Casaubon’s codicil and his love for Dorothea abiding—quits Middlemarch and, as a result, Rosamond’s company.

Even after Will's departure, Rosamond allows her fantasies to persist to the point that they become something of a coping mechanism for the young lady as she anticipates her and Lydgate's impending financial ruin. She, therefore, clings to this "romantic drama which Lydgate's presence had no longer the magic to create" (709). The concept of courtly love is in itself inherently romantic and idealistic, having little to no correlation to reality. For Rosamond, it allows an escape, "an unreal Better [that] had a sentimental charm which diverted her ennui" (709). Her flights of fancy prove not to be entirely innocuous, however, for she fails to distinguish between them and her comparatively bleak reality, eventually exacerbating rather than easing her ennui. The prospect of Will's return to Middlemarch leads necessarily to the collapse of Rosamond's artificial fantasy and the artificial courtly love that is so integral to its persistence. She imagines a scene in which "Will Ladislaw was always to be a bachelor and live near her, always to be at her command, and have an understood though never fully expressed passion for her, which would be sending out lambent flames every now and then in interesting scenes" (709). Meanwhile, she invests all of her remaining optimism in this illusory relationship, waiting in "languid melancholy and suspense, fixing her mind on Will Ladislaw's coming as the one point of hope and interest" (724).

It is when Dorothea walks in on Will comforting Rosamond that Rosamond mistakenly believes that she has succeeded in the role of the courtly lover, banishing her rival for Will's undivided affection. As Dorothea departs, visibly upset, Rosamond feels only "gratification" (731). She attempts to use Will's distress as an opportunity to win over him and his worship, but Will quickly rejects her, "looking fiercely not at Rosamond but at a point a few inches away from her" (731); he does not even look at Rosamond as he begins to berate her, demonstrating his complete lack of regard for her. For all of Rosamond's effort, Will's love for Dorothea endures. Meanwhile, what is left of Rosamond's world crashes down around her upon this

realization, and “while these poisoned weapons were being hurled at her, [she] was almost losing the sense of her identity” (732). Indeed, Rosamond’s adopted identity as the courtly lover proves to be as insufficient as that of the Angel in the House to procure for Rosamond any sense of fulfillment or power. She, now without identity, is equipped with no means to defer the unadulterated pain that besets her. Eliot writes, “the terrible collapse of the illusion towards which all her hope had been strained was a stroke which had too thoroughly shaken her: her little world was in ruins, and she felt herself tottering in the midst as a lonely bewildered consciousness” (734). Having depleted every tool in her feminine arsenal in pursuit of some semblance of power and contentment, Rosamond finds herself instead wholly powerless and without hope.

Up to this point in the novel, all of Rosamond’s relationships with other characters are defined in terms of the socially constructed roles that she assumes, first the Angel in the House and then the courtly lover. However, it is at this point—once both of these personas have proven insufficient—that Eliot reveals Rosamond’s essence in a way that is potentially transformative and redemptive; Rosamond, at her lowest point, allows herself to be vulnerable in front of Dorothea, who in turn exposes her own deep suffering. Rosamond—whose focus has previously been turned exclusively inward toward herself and her own interests—experiences a revelation in the comprehension of this other woman and her inner world, equally as full and complex as her own. This is possible in this specific meeting due to the absence of the socially constructed roles or masks that Rosamond has assumed in previous encounters. In this moment, “The barriers of convention are down, and the two women meet in a ‘natural’ place beyond social restrictions” (Cosslett 100). Rosamond does not perform for Dorothea, which allows her instead to escape her own self and feel with and for another.

At first, Rosamond is wary of Dorothea's coming to visit again; she can only assume "that this Mrs Casaubon—this woman who predominated in all things concerning her—must have come now with the sense of having the advantage, and with animosity prompting her to use it" (744-45). As far as Rosamond is concerned, she has lost and Dorothea has won. She is not yet able to grasp the complexity of the situation, to see beyond herself and to imagine herself in the place of another. Indeed, she takes the "conventional view and think[s] of her as a hostile female rival who has come to triumph over her" (Cosslett 94). Even in the shattered ruins of Rosamond's world, convention is all she has ever known, and so she clings to it. However, the unconventional nature of what is about to occur becomes quickly evident. Eliot even describes Dorothea's greeting, the reaching out of her ungloved hand toward Rosamond, as unusual in its warmth and intimacy. Rosamond's preconceived notions have yet again failed her. They sit close to one another, and, in a moment of revelation, "each woman is in turn pulled out of a deep self-awareness into an awareness of the otherness of the other" (Mitchell 324). The purpose of Dorothea's very appearance in the Lydgate household is to ease Rosamond's suffering. Rosamond is shocked by her perceived rivals' selflessness, which in turn produces Rosamond's own recognition of Dorothea's grief; as a result, Rosamond empathizes for the first time in the novel. Rosamond's worldview is shaken for the second time in the span of a day, for

she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her. (747-48)

The world is changed for Rosamond, and she now has the opportunity to decide for herself who she will be in this moment rather than adhering to society's preordained roles.

Dorothea may have come with the intention of rescuing Rosamond, but ultimately Rosamond rescues Dorothea too, demonstrating an unprecedented altruism. Indeed, "the scene between Dorothea and Rosamond turns into a *mutual* rescue" (Cosslett 76). There is an element of reciprocity as "Pride was being broken down between these two" (748). Both women are at their lowest point, enduring incredible pain, and yet they each step outside the bounds of their own inner world in an attempt to ease the other's suffering. Neither the domestic ideal nor the myth of courtly love carries any weight in this intensely human moment, and Rosamond allows these masks to fall away as she,

taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck. (749)

Though Rosamond's every outward action previous to this moment may be simply performative, this kiss is obviously sincere. She goes on to reassure Dorothea that Will loves her, declaring, "The blame of what happened is entirely mine" (750). Rosamond takes responsibility for her actions and feels genuine remorse for the pain that she has caused due to the empathetic presence of this unconventional woman, this would-be St. Theresa. Though one single afternoon of sincerity and selflessness cannot make up for a lifetime of socialized selfishness, "Its very abnormality is what makes the relationship so intense and significant, an unrepeatable turning-point in the two women's lives" (Cosslett 102).

Despite the redemptive nature of this moment, though, it would be untrue to claim that the Rosamond of the novel's finale has transcended convention or that her behavior is not informed by her socialization as a woman in Victorian society. Rosamond and Dorothea commune with one another in "a place of natural emotions and ahistorical heroism, outside the confines of society; but this sort of contact, by definition, cannot be sustained when they return to their social roles and everyday lives" (Cosslett 102). Rosamond's transformation is, at best, temporary and proves unsustainable due to her ultimate entrenchment in a patriarchal culture. Over the years, her relationship with Lydgate does not improve; she dutifully carries out the obligation of childbearing, and eventually achieves the wealth she desires in her second marriage. Overall, she leads a relatively mundane upper-middle-class Victorian life, the life into which she has been socialized. This may be disappointing given the seemingly transformative scene she shares with Dorothea, but it must be taken into account that "George Eliot's plots contain little by way of solutions, and a great deal that looks like expediency and compromise: hers is no utopian radicalism" (Flint 179). Eliot has no interest in providing easy solutions to the aspects of society that she scrutinizes in her novel. Indeed, the outcome of each character's life can be taken to be tragic in its own way, and the great tragedy of Rosamond's life is that the "model [of Victorian femaleness] gave way to an ideal which had little connection with any functional and responsible role in society" (Vicinus ix). Still, this is not to suggest that Rosamond's experience with Dorothea is meaningless; for the rest of her life, "she never uttered a word in depreciation of Dorothea, keeping in religious remembrance the generosity which had come to her aid in the sharpest crisis of her life" (782). Thus, Eliot suggests that, to a certain extent, "This breakthrough into the foreign mind-space of the other opens up the possibility for better relationships, for actions based on a genuine empathic extension that first recognize difference before recognizing similarity" (Mitchell 325). Rosamond is changed to some small

degree, and lives a better life than she otherwise would have had she never broken free of her socialization and entered into empathy at all. Indeed, “George Eliot’s feminism helps us to come to terms with the present, enabling us to live in it with courage, perhaps even with a measure of grace” (Thomas 412). Though Rosamond is born into a society that operates against the prospect of female fulfillment and empathy in order to preserve a misguided domestic ideal, Eliot implicitly tasks the reader with creating that world, little by little, by working toward “the growing good” by means of “unhistoric acts” that are, nevertheless, “incalculably diffusive” (785).

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